

FROM STRONG BLACK WOMAN TO WOMANIST: AN AFROCENTRIC
APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING PERSPECTIVES OF STRENGTHS,
LIFE EXPERIENCES, AND COPING MECHANISMS OF SINGLE,
AFRICAN AMERICAN CUSTODIAL GRANDMOTHERS

by

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ABSTRACT

As there is an absent generation of parents due to the current ills of society such as drug and alcohol addictions, the AIDS/HIV epidemic, parental neglect and abandonment, incarcerations, mental illness and the deaths of parents, there will be an absent generation of grandparents – grandmothers in particular – for the present generation of grandchildren when they, themselves, become parents. State and other agencies will become more overburdened with assuming the care for the children of this present generation of grandchildren. This descriptive and exploratory study was designed to explore the life experiences, values, beliefs, coping mechanisms, and strengths of single, mostly low-income, African American grandmothers who are raising their grandchildren.

These custodial grandmothers are raising their grandchildren without either parent in the home. The grandmothers live in an urban, inner city area of Las Vegas, Nevada, in an area known as the Westside. Data were collected through individual interviews and focus group discussions. The study found that many of the grandmothers prefer not to accept needed assistance from social services agencies or engage with helping professionals because of their belief that no one is interested or concerned about their perceptions; their experiences, values, and beliefs; how they manage to care for the grandchildren; or their strengths. They believe that they do not have a voice in policies and procedures that affect them and their grandchildren. To assist themselves, they

agreed to adopt the methods of slave women where many had to raise their children without the benefit of a spouse or other assistance. The participants in this study were willing to engage with each other as a strengths-based, self-help support group within their community, offering each other their strengths, suggestions, and solutions to what they perceive as problematic.

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Carolyn Mashaun Hutcherson.

May she continue to grasp and hold on to the zest of life, as I taught her.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Who Is Mama?

In many families, grandparents have been regarded as a part or an extension of the family unit, and have contributed to a sense of family cohesiveness. In some families, grandparents have been important and direct members of the family unit. In either instance, as important members of the family structure, grandparents have often played a supportive role in helping to hold the family intact.

Times have changed. No longer are they considered the family members whose main objective is to maintain family togetherness, or to present a friendly, fun-loving image, or to assume temporary custodial responsibilities of grandchildren when necessary. Today, many grandparents have assumed a different role, the role of full time custodial parent.

Years ago, Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) conducted research that resulted in their recognizing five styles of grandparenting: (a) formal, (b) fun seeker, (c) distant, (e) surrogate, and (f) reservoir. They described formal type grandparents as those who do not interfere with parenting; these grandparents do not have a close relationship with the grandchildren. The fun seeker type grandparents fully enjoy their grandchildren and have a tendency to overindulge or spoil them. The distant type grandparents are similar to

formal type grandparents; their contact with the grandchildren is brief. This type of grandparent may participate in special events, such as birthdays and holidays, but mostly, they will not have any specific involvement in their grandchildren's lives. The surrogate grandparent assumes full parental duties and responsibilities. Similar to the surrogate type are the reservoir grandparents. This type, as in a primary parental role, maintains authority over grandchildren; the authoritarian role is maintained, with emphasis on power and control but only while the grandchildren are in the care of the grandparents.

Neugarten and Weinstein surmised from their research that grandparents serving in the capacity of surrogate and reservoir grandparents were the least common styles of grandparenting. Today, a marked shift has occurred, and both styles have become very common.

Factors Influencing Change in the Grandparent Role

Changes in society have brought about a change in the family structure. Studies have shown that this change is mainly caused by a generation of parents who have abandoned the parenting role. Researchers have contended that the abnormalities in present day society have given rise to circumstances that have prevented parents from being the primary caregivers of their children. The problems and troubles have been described as drug and alcohol addictions, the onset of the AIDS and HIV epidemics, parental neglect and abandonment, incarcerations, mental illness, and death of the parents (Burnette, 1997; Burton, 1992; Emick & Haslip, 1996; Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2000; Harden, Clark, & McGuire, 1997; Okazawa-Rey, 1998; Pinson-Millburn, Fabian, Schlossberg, & Pyle, 1996; Young & Smith, 2000). Due to these causal effects, there has been a marked growth in the number of children who have been placed in the homes of

other family or nonfamily members. More often, it has been the home of the grandparents (Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997). Minkler and Roe (1993) asserted that a tremendous rise has been seen in the number of neglected, abused, and abandoned children placed formally and informally in some type of kinship care. Between 1980 and 1990, there was an increase of 44% in the number of children living with relatives in households lacking either parent (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). In 2000, more than six million children across the United States, all under age 18, lived in households that were headed by grandparents or other relatives, as many as 2.5 million children lived in these homes without the presence of either parent, a 30% increase from 1990 to 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Nationally, 2.4 million grandparents have reported that they are responsible for their grandchildren who live with them. Thirty-four percent of the grandparents live in the households without the presence of the children's parents. Seventy-one percent of the grandparents are under the age of 60. Twenty-nine percent of these grandparents are African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

This study included single African American grandmothers who live in an area known as the Westside in Las Vegas, Nevada. In the state of Nevada, in 2000, there were 30,580 children who lived in grandparent-headed households. This represented 6.0% of all children who live in the state. There were another 14,318 children, or 2.8% of all children in the state, who lived in households headed by other relatives. Of the children who lived in households headed by their grandparents or other relatives, 19,278 lived in the homes without the presence of either parent (Nevada: A State Fact Sheet for Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Children, 2005). In this same report, 18,685

grandparents reported that they were responsible for grandchildren who lived with them, and 33.0% of the grandparents were raising their grandchildren without the children's parents present. Twelve percent of the grandparents were African American

In 2000, there were 60,606 African Americans living in Las Vegas, Nevada, representing 11.8% of the city's total population of 538, 653. In Las Vegas, there were 4,812 grandparents with grandchildren living in their homes. These grandparents were responsible for providing their grandchildren's basic needs and 12% of these grandparents were African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Grandparents (mostly grandmothers) have assumed the role as primary caregivers of their grandchildren in great numbers (Kelley, Whitley, Sipe, & Yorker, 2000). They have served as safety nets for children whose parents have been unable or unwilling to provide for their children. Research has revealed that custodial grandparents have stepped in, in order to keep families together and to keep children out of a formal foster care system (Kornhaber, 1996).

Studies have shown that a number of grandparents have increasingly been confronted with circumstances that have not been typical of a role formally portrayed as ordinary, usual, or customary grandparents (Emick, & Haslip, 1996; Kornhaber, 1996; Minkler & Roe, 1993; Minkler & Roe, 1996). Researchers and policy makers have shown that this important phenomenon deserves attention and concern (Burnette, 1997; Minkler & Roe, 1993). Additionally, increased research has identified many social factors affecting caregiver grandparents such as the need for financial support, respite care, and other social service interventions (Harden, Clark, & Maguire, 1997). There has

been great interest in developing community interventions and service programs to assist and support grandparent caregivers (Emick & Haslip, 1996).

The African American Custodial Grandmother (AACG)

Grandparent-headed households are represented at all socioeconomic levels and across all ethnic and racial groups. In African American families, there has been a rapid increase in the occurrences of primary parenting between generations in African American families, where the grandmother is the primary caregiver of grandchildren (Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997; Okazawa-Rey, 1998; Ruiz, 2000). In spite of the rising interest in the number of grandparent-headed households, there has been a paucity in research on African American custodial grandmothers (AACGs). Research on AACGs appears to lag behind in comparison to research on Anglo American custodial grandmothers (Burton and Dilworth-Anderson, 1991).

The probabilities of becoming a caregiver of grandchildren are increased if the grandparent is single, low-income, and African American (Fuller-Thomas, Minkler, & Driver, 1997; Harden, Clark, & McGuire, 1997). Various professionals such as educators and health and social services providers have estimated grandparent-headed households to be as high 20% to 50% in some low-income African American communities (Minkler & Roe, 1993).

Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, and Driver (1997) examined the prevalence of grandparent caregiving in the United States and presented a national profile of grandparent caregivers based on data collected from 1992 to 1994. The study revealed that African Americans had 83% higher odds of being full time grandparent caregivers than those respondents represented by other ethnic groups. They surmised this might be

attributed to a historical practice found in many African American communities of parents, children, grandparents and other family members, living together and sharing caregiving responsibilities. The composition of African American households reflects a continuing pattern of shared residence and caregiving that originated in West African culture and tradition (Sudakarsa, 1981).

Historically, African American grandmothers have always played an important role in the survival of the family (Burton & Dilworth-Anderson, 1991; Hagestad & Burton, 1986; Ruiz, 2000). Frequently, they have been considered the anchors of the family; the proverbial “rocks.” In many African American families, grandmothers fulfill many roles. They can serve as keepers of the familial flame and as the guardian of the family history. They also can serve as a family stabilizing influence, by providing spiritual and other types of support. The grandmothers’ position and role responsibilities in an extended family context have been expansive and flexible. They have probably always assisted in caregiving for their immediate family members as well as for others who may or may not be blood related. One of the strengths and venerable traditions of the African American community has been a commitment to the collective responsibility of its children (Danzon & Jackson, 1997; Wilhelmus, 1998). Grandmothers have been important in this chain of collective responsibility, performing essential roles in assisting with the care and well-being of their own grandchildren and great grandchildren, as well as the children outside their immediate family group (Ruiz, 2000).

AACGs’ Challenges in Parenting the Second Time Around

Many AACGs may have an expectation of assuming the role as full time custodial caregivers of their grandchildren (Emick & Haslip, 1996; Hagestad & Burton, 1986). In

some African American communities, raising grandchildren or assisting in their upbringing can be described as the norm rather than the exception. More often, the parents may have always resided in the grandmother's home with the children and have shared child-raising responsibilities with the grandparent.

Child rearing in the United States is a challenging task for anyone who is a parent. It is probable that it is even more challenging in the inner cities, African American communities, and especially for low-income, single, middle-aged, and elderly African American custodial grandmothers. These grandmothers have paid a high price to assume the caregiving responsibility of raising their grandchildren when the parents have either not been in the home or have not accepted their parental responsibilities. Lifelong histories of poverty, low income, poor health status and physical functioning, and heavy emotional demands can present special difficulties for many of these grandmothers. Those grandmothers who reside in the inner cities have been most deeply affected by various social problems (Minkler & Roe, 1993) and often, social, political, and economic resources have been scarce for these families (Burnette, 1997).

Cox (2002) related there has been an increase in resources and social supports for custodial grandparents, as the needs and concerns of households headed by a grandparent have become more commonly acknowledged. However, Barresi and Menon (1990) found that many African Americans, especially the elderly, often do not use formal sources of support. Many custodial grandmothers, including elderly ones, are not inclined to speak out in communicating their needs to others outside of their families or their immediate communities (Minkler & Roe, 1993). As they interact with the educational, public health, juvenile justice, social services, and other social systems, they

may be attempting to navigate or link with social systems structures that are unfamiliar and challenging to them (Burnette, 1997). Then too, even if they have used the systems before, these systems have probably changed over the years (Burnette, 1997; Kluger & Aprea, 1999), and may require them to access the systems in a different or even a more difficult way than before. These dealings may result in frustrations that can weaken their resolve, dim their perspectives, and cause them to challenge their motivations and to question their ability to raise their grandchildren.

Many AACGs lack appropriate parenting skills necessary to raise today's children. Using the same techniques that they used in raising their own children is not adequate. If they are aware of the contemporary nature of child rearing, a readiness to adjust to the changes is very difficult (Gibson, 2002; Strom & Strom, 1993). Additionally, generational differences may find the AACGs unaware of current social issues and their effect on the grandchildren, leaving the AACGs unprepared to deal with contemporary peer pressure, sexual activity, as well as gang and illicit drugs activity endemic in inner city neighborhoods (Gibson, 2002).

Rationale for AACGs Raising Today's Children

Low income and single, inner city, African American grandmothers have found themselves burdened with raising children alone and with additional pressures of poverty. Many have been willing to take on the parental responsibility because of their strong belief in keeping the family together, their suspicions about public agencies, and their unwillingness to surrender their grandchildren to state social services officials. Many have a profound belief that the children's parents will one day take charge and assume functioning parenting roles (Emick & Hayslip, 1996; Okazawa-Rey, 1998; Ruiz, 2000).

Gibson (2002) explored the reasons grandmothers decided to take on the role of custodial parents of their grandchildren in spite of the possibility of increasing physical, psychological, economic, and social consequences. Gibson found their reasons included the tradition of keeping the children close within the family, their own relationships with the grandchildren, a distrust of the foster care system, the custodial grandmother being the only resource, a strong spiritual relationship, and the refusal of the grandchild's other grandmother to become involved with caregiving. Although Gibson offered reasons why some grandmothers assumed the tasks of raising their grandchildren, there are unanswered questions as to how the grandmothers coped with childrearing responsibilities and what motivates and maintains them in their roles.

The Problem

According to Okazawa-Rey (1998), social workers and health care providers in urban areas were among the initial group of professionals to identify the upsurge of grandparents who have become parents again. As the number of custodial grandparents increases, service providers will increasingly come into contact with middle-aged and older women struggling with the difficulties of raising children (Young & Smith, 2000). There is a need to consider the grandmothers as resources of information in order to assist in affecting changes for this growing population.

Some AACGs may believe using coping mechanisms to raise their grandchildren helps them with managing problems and facing adversities, but they may also be aware that their coping mechanisms do not necessarily shield them from the problems. Determining how they cope with their caregiving responsibilities is helpful in the development of useful techniques and strategies tailored to their special needs.

Concentrating on their individual strengths, rather than the deficits of their circumstances, is one approach that can offer solutions and can aid in building effective models of service.

The Purpose of the Study

Studies have provided the assertion that when minority families are examined, researchers may tend to not be interested in how various influences affect the families. Rather, the main concern has often been developing and implementing strategies and interventions on what they, the researchers, perceive as the problem (Dickerson, 1995).

The purpose of this study was to develop knowledge that will specifically impact interventions designed for AACGs. The knowledge gained will contribute to a significant understanding of their experiences and behaviors, as well as an understanding of their beliefs and values.

This study was also done in order to gather information that will assist helping professionals to initiate or expand strategies for strengths based interventions. Many AACGs have strengths that are based on self-definitions and self-worth that can be utilized in a positive manner. Going directly to the source for information can yield strategies based on knowledge of how the AACGs survive in the faces of adversity. The strategies developed should reflect the strength and cultural integrities of the AACGs that are useful in gaining a more responsive approach in meeting their needs.

Summary

The prevalence of AACGs raising grandchildren and caring for other family members is not new in the African American communities. Burnette (1998) posits that what is new is that helping professionals have taken notice and are acknowledging the

extraordinary increase of grandparents, particularly grandmothers, who are raising their grandchildren. As with custodial grandmothers of other ethnic groups, and those AACGs who are of a different socioeconomic status, the drafting of low income, single, middle-aged, and older AACGs into rearing their grandchildren and possibly other young family members is probably expected to continue for a long time.

It is often assumed that AACGs need interventions that positively impact their issues and these issues may have often been identified by others, rather than by the AACGs themselves. There is a need to explore the day-to-day experiences of AACGs in order to assess their individual coping mechanisms and management of problematic situations. It is possible that AACGs do indeed possess skills, knowledge, and experiences needed to raise their grandchildren, and much of this may be based on their indelible strengths and ability to endure and persevere.

Erikson (1966) wondered why there was so little attention paid to the subject of the strengths of low-income African American families and so much attention about their weaknesses. Forty years later, the question is still compelling and applicable when changing the face from African American families to low-income, single AACGs, who head low-income families. AACGs are not likely to have salient descriptions of their strengths and resiliency emphasized in the literature when they are grouped under the umbrella with African American families and African American women. This may be due to not only inadequate historical evidence, negative stereotypical images, and impersonal strategies used for studying African American families but related specifically to AACGs, because an appropriate method to gain an understanding about the sources of their values, strengths, and resilience. Perhaps it is simply because no one has asked about their sources.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gregory (1995) asserted that in studying African American women, such as the AACGs, the best way to structure the framework of their perspectives, their life experiences, their beliefs, and values, is to analyze their historical and cultural components, and their behavior. In order to understand the strengths, resilience and other salient attributes of African American women as they apply to AACGs and their ability to survive, first it is necessary to understand the background that has shaped them into the persons they have become and who they are (Ladner, 1971). To do this, one must go back to their roots and to their historical beginnings of how these attributes and behaviors were formed (Peterson, 1992).

The literature review addresses the changing concepts and roles of the African American family system prior to their dispersion from West Africa, and upon and after their entrance into the slave system. In his book, The Strengths of African American Families, Twenty-Five Years Later, Hill (1999) commented on several studies that revealed the resiliency-producing values and successful coping strategies of African American families and how their cultural strengths were derived from their African legacy. In addition to Hill, other afrocentric writers have identified major resiliency factors indigenous to African American family functioning. These factors include

extended family networks and kinship bonds, role flexibility in the family, strong spiritual orientation, cultural strengths, and flexible coping skills (Billingsley, 1992; Kane, 2000; Peterson, 1992; Wilson, 1989). These characteristics can also be found among other racial or ethnic groups but because of their unique history of slavery and racial oppression, the characteristics have manifested in different ways in many African American families (Hill, 1999).

The review illustrates how these factors relate to the AACG phenomenon and what factors influence their perceptions of their strengths and resiliency. Also discussed are the historical emergences of the mammy and the matriarch labels that led to the phenomenon of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) and its definition. The review also discusses the construction of concepts and provides definitions that were used to guide the study. In this respect, the chapter discusses: (a) the womanist concept, (b) defining afrocentrism and afrocentricity from both a general and social science perspective as the concept relates to African Americans, (c) afrocentric principal areas of inquiry that include cosmological, ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives, (d) rationale for a qualitative study, and (e) the research questions.

Historical Context

Precolonial West Africa

Some African Americans share affiliations and world views that are grounded and centered in the elements of traditional precolonial West African culture. African based culture emphasizes the centrality of the family (Blassingame, 1979). African American family researchers who studied traditional precolonial West African culture found that the African family was one of the strongest cohesive units as compared to other cultural

groups. The traditional family system structurally stretched in all directions, horizontally and vertically; taking into account every family member of the community or of the tribe (Blassingame, 1979; Nobles, 1974; Sudarkasa, 1981), those living or dead, and those who are not yet born (Mbiti, 1970). Blassingame (1979) suggested that the transformation of African roles in the family led to the creation of a family system where men and women equally shared authority and responsibility.

Ladner (1971) explained that in addition to being wives and mothers, there were other very important and powerful roles within the family or tribe for women along the west coast in precolonial Africa. Many were the chief traders in the village and handled all the family resources and financial matters (Bracey, Meier, & Rudwick, 1970). These positions probably offered the women a type of personal independence, meaning that they may not have had to rely on the male members of the family or tribe. Bracey and colleagues further related that because of this, many West African women held their economic destinies in their own hands and were probably fully capable of going their own ways if they became discontented or unhappy with their husbands. Politically, many African women were important in the administration of tribal affairs and their positions of economic and political power were greatly honored and respected in the family (Nobles, 1974). In addition, family lineage was often matrilineal, meaning that lineage descent was often traced through the female. The African women in their roles were highly respected and honored within the tribal culture (White, 1985).

The Slave Family

Having entered into slavery, many Africans desperately tried to maintain the traditions and life styles to which they were accustomed (Ladner, 1991). These were

described as the high regards for the family, both living and dead members, and the highly developed life foundations that were a part of African society. They struggled intensely to conserve what they could in order to hold on to what was left of their civilization and of their former family life style.

In her historical research, Davis (1981) found that the majority of slave women were required by the slave owners to be as masculine and robust as the slave men when working in the plantation fields. Female slaves were forced to perform the same hard and tedious work as the male slaves. African American feminist author and scholar, bell hooks (who uses lower case alphabet letters in the spelling of her name) asserted that plantation owners refused to acknowledge that the slave women were actually females. Instead, slave women were considered to be genderless (hooks, 1981). With such equal opportunity given to the laboring in the fields for both slave men and women, one could surmise that slave men and slave women were equally prominent in the slave family.

This was not so—White (1985) related that while in captivity, slave families were not male dominated nor did the slave man and woman have equal family roles. Instead, slave families were primarily female centered, with the slave woman being the nucleus of the family unit. In his book, Climbing Jacob's Ladder, Billingsley (1992) claimed that the slave system required that the slave mother not the slave father serve as the central focus of the family, although the female slave did not have dominant or controlling power in the family. She certainly was not the head of her family. As with his own family, the plantation owner owned both his plantation and the slaves on it. Therefore, the controlling power in the slave family resided in neither the slave man nor the slave

woman but dwelled with the slave owner, and this power was often shared with the plantation's overseer or foreman.

The Extended Family and Kinship Bonds

It must be understood that there is variation among African American families. As with any culture, observance of long-held traditions can be found in many African American families, while others may hold to fewer or different traditions (Mosley-Howard & Evans, 2000). A major characteristic common in many African American families is the extended family (Kane, 2000; Wilson, 1986). Nobles (1974) and Wilson (1986) contended that the extended family and kinship bonds found in many African American families have been in existence since times in precolonial West Africa.

A distinctive feature of the African family patterns that survived in America was the primacy given to extended families versus nuclear families (Billingsley, 1992). Hill (1999) and Wilson (1986) claimed that in this type of family, the bonds of kinship could be extended to related and nonrelated members who often provide various kinds of support. These included providing daycare services to working parents, informal (taking-in), and formal foster care and adoption, and mutual social and economic assistance. These factors contributed to a reduction of child abuse. McAdoo (1980) referred to extended family support networks as those that provide emotional support and economic supplements, as well as the protection of the family's honor and integrity from attacks by outside forces. These were usually forces outside the family realm or outside of the community.

For traditional precolonial West Africans, it was the community or the family that defined the individual as being a member of the group. The saying, "I am me because we

are; since we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1970, p. 141), represents many African Americans’ cultural tradition of family group cohesion as it exists today (Boyd-Franklin, 1991; Nobles, 1974; Peterson, 1992). By definition, for the African, “I” was actually “We” (Nobles, 1974). For many African Americans, there are clear indications of this tradition. “We” does not imply “you” stand alone or are alone. This extended family caregiving may include grandparents as caregivers. In order to escape racism, oppression and poverty in the South, a period known to many as the “great migration” (Burton & Dilworth-Anderson, 1991; Sudarkasa, 1981; Wilson, 1989), or the rural to urban migration period, encouraged many African Americans to leave the South to seek employment and improved living conditions in the industrialized northern, midwestern, and western urban cities. Many African American parents often left their children in the care of grandparents and other family members who remained in the South, until the parents were settled in the new state and were financially able to take care of them (Burton, 1992; Ruiz, 1999).

In an exploratory study conducted by Minkler, Roe, and Robertson-Beckley (1994) involving 71 AACGs living in the San Francisco Bay area, findings revealed that most were members of solid networks of family ties. However, not all single parent African American families have supportive networks. In a similar study of AACGs, Burton (1992) found that the study participants did not receive consistent and reliable support through family networks. Therefore, some but not all AACGs are the recipients of benefits from extended family members.

Role Changes and Flexibility

As family structures change, family members' roles also change. These roles are a function in the makeup of the family structure (Burton & Dilworth-Anderson, 1991). In the structure of West African families, the family role elements flowed into each other, meaning that the functions of the family members flowed within and throughout the family. The role changes were flexible and interchangeable, moving forward, backwards, branching out to other roles and back again as necessary (Nobles, 1974). Within the precolonial African worldview, role flexibility was the sharing and the changing of roles as needed for the maintenance of family unity (Asante, 1988).

Role flexibility in many African American families represents a resilient, stabilizing, and protective factor (Hill, 1999). In Hill's review of cross-cultural studies of contemporary African American families, family role flexibility was found to be a major contributor to the security, and even upward mobility of some African American families. In role flexibility, parenting roles are shared not only between parents, but also with grandparents, other adult relatives, fictive kin, and older siblings who perform parental functions for younger siblings (Barbarin, 1983; Hill, 1999; Kane, 2000). Mosley-Howard and Evans (2000) relate that the flexibility of roles found in many African American families is considered a major strength for family solidarity and stability.

An increase of parenting role change and flexibility is shown in the disproportionate numbers of African American women who are rearing grandchildren today (Burton, 1996; Hill, 1999). They are no longer just grandmothers, but they are the parents and in many cases, the only parent. Assuming a different role such as caregiver

or parent reflects the strength of these grandmothers and the resiliency and adaptability characterizations of many African American families (Billingsley, 1992). These AACGs certainly provide care for their grandchildren for greater and different reasons than those grandparents who provided such care during the “great migration.”

Effects of Role Changes

Although assuming role changes can demonstrate a reflection of their strengths, many AACGs experience role conflict (Burton, 1992). AACGs assuming the parental role the second time, perhaps later in life, may experience dilemmas that are physical, emotional and financial (Burton, 1992; Minkler & Roe, 1993; Morrow-Kondos, Weber, Cooper, & Hesser, 1997; Ruiz, 2000). Moreover, some AACGs raising grandchildren are also caregivers for elderly or frail family members. Burton and DeVries (1993) asserted that, though many AACGs are committed to the caring of their grandchildren, they have difficulty adjusting to believing or knowing that their caregiving role means that they must endure, not a temporary, but a long term role change.

Younger AACGs often do not appreciate the role of grandparenthood because of a role conflict between being employed outside of the home, having caregiving responsibilities for their own children in some instances, and their grandchildren (Burton & DeVries, 1993). Under these circumstances, role transitions can disturb family timetables (Burton & Bengston, 1985). For example, Burton (1996) asserted, that the parent could be a young or older teenager, thereby causing the teenager’s mother to become a grandparent at an early age, a role that the older mother may consider premature. In a study of the effects of teenage pregnancy on intergenerational family structure and the roles of African American women, Burton found that the majority of

young grandmothers refused to take on the role of a caregiving parent to their grandchildren. Instead, they passed the burden of care up to the next level, to their mother, the great-grandmother.

Spiritual Influence

Spiritual or religious faith is probably the one thing that connects many African Americans with their African roots (Boyd-Franklin, 1991; Peterson, 1992), as many of their religious practices today contain many of the elements of African spirituality (Hill, 1999). These elements are described by Jules-Rosette (1980), as a belief in a direct connection between the natural and the supernatural or praying; a person who speaks to a higher power and believes that the person's voice is heard by the supernatural. There is a belief in the significant ability of music to call upon the supernatural or what is known as praising or giving thanks. Additionally, there is a belief in the importance of human intervention in the supernatural world through possession and spiritual control, or shouting or exaltation, and a belief such as having been filled with the "holy ghost" or being touched by a higher power. There is also the importance of participatory verbal performance such as chanting or a call and response method.

According to Hill (1999), studies have revealed that a strong religious orientation and spirituality are major sources from which many African Americans draw strengths that enhance their resilience to life's chaos. Gibbs (1991) contended that the African American church, more than any other institution, has been the place for outward and inner expressions, sometimes in a collective sense, for seeking inspiration and motivation to withstand the realities of their lives that they deem as burdensome and troublesome.

The church is considered an essential place where many African American people join collectively to communicate and to share their convictions and to enter a healing process. They come together collectively to share in their faith, to mend each other's wounds with a balm of spiritual inspirations, and to discard the harsh effects they encounter from life's transgressions (Peterson, 1992).

Gibson (2002) conducted a study of twelve AACGs to explore grandmothers parenting their grandchildren. Gibson's study participants acknowledged a spiritual presence in their daily lives and discussed their relationship with God. In her study, Gibson hoped to determine why these 12 AACGs assumed the parental role of their grandchildren. She found that one of the dominant themes, and several significant sub-themes that emerged from the study, were the AACGs' acknowledgment to having strong spiritual beliefs and devotion to a relationship with God. These strong beliefs and devotion to God helped them to not only make the decisions to assume the parental role, but the same strong belief and devotion to God was what they used in a primary sense, to explain their source of strength that enabled them to maintain their roles.

Cultural Strengths

Exum and Moore (1993) described African Americans as being endowed with strengths that are inherent to their culture and are probably precolonial West African in nature. They described those strengths as flexibility, forgiveness, resilience, and persistence.

In explaining the reasons why they believed that many African Americans are able to persevere, Exum and Moore (1993) stated that perseverance is the foundation of

their cultural strengths. They contended that many African Americans have had to maintain flexibility and adaptability in various aspects of their lives in order to survive. They further related that historically, many African Americans have been successful in making the most and best of whatever resources they had or lacked. They averred that many African Americans are known to be capable of withstanding very high levels of stress for long periods. They also added that many African Americans are known to have the capability of recovering swiftly from personal crises, or at least this is projected.

Finally, they believed that a basis of strength in many African Americans is their belief in forgiveness and tolerance. According to Exum and Moore, these moral virtues probably originated from the African concept of acceptance. This can be described as accepting what is as being the way it is or the way it was meant to be. This does not mean that African Americans experience less or more emotional pain or suffering than other ethnic or cultural groups, but rather historically, many have a tendency to refrain from verbalizing or openly displaying the effects of their pain and suffering.

Flexible Coping Skills

In her definition of coping, Burnette (1998) stated that it is “an individual’s ongoing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands deemed as arduous or above and beyond the extent of her or his resource” (p. 13). This means attempting to go beyond one’s capability of trying to successfully manage a challenging situation. Another definition of coping is provided by Myers (1980) who stated that coping presents “alternative ways of dealing with the pressures of society” (p. 5), as well as confronting other life’s problems. In her study of 400 African

American women, Myers found that one alternative to coping was maintaining a high level of self image. In the study, she compared the women who were heads of their families with those who had male mates who were assumed to be the heads of their families. She inquired about their ways of coping with pressures and stressors in their daily lives. The findings distinguished high levels of self esteem in both groups of women. The study results indicated the majority of the participants developed and maintained a good self image, which they believed led to a greater ability to cope with difficulties. Myers surmised that women's high levels of self esteem attributed to their ability to cope.

Particularly for African Americans, Exum and Moore (1993) asserted that many tend to use a wide array of ego defenses or coping mechanisms that were developed from their way of life or the way they were reared. Although they appear to represent selfdefeating coping mechanisms, the most common as described by Exum and Moore, are: (a) denial, (b) isolation, (c) repression, and (d) introjections. Denial or feigning ignorance occurs with the refusal to acknowledge the existence of something disturbing or upsetting. It is as if the disturbing or upsetting event never happened, when it actually did happen. An example in the vernacular is, "Don't name it, don't claim it. It will go away, and if it doesn't, it was meant to be anyway." This also describes the African concept of acceptance. Related to denial and often done deliberately, isolation is failing to recognize or recall links between related information, assumed associations, or discoveries that might cause anxiety. In other words, there is no link or pattern, or relationship to an occurrence that might have caused the anxiety. Repression involves suppressing memories, feelings, or perceptions that have high anxiety-producing

possibilities such as deliberately failing to remember the occurrence that produced the anxiety in the first place. Introjections relate to defending against disappointment in another or something by accepting blame or responsibility or making one's self the culprit, as in self blaming. These coping mechanisms cannot be generalized to apply to all African Americans. Moreover, on the surface, these coping mechanisms do not necessarily characterize an embrace of the SBW perception.

In describing African American women's ability to cope, Ladner (1998) suggested that a "can-do spirit" (p. 126) is an appropriate term. The term is essentially synonymous with resilience, survival, and coping. Many African American women believing or knowing what they can possibly be confronted with in their everyday lives could appear to be endowed with certain emotional strengths. With some AACGs, as with many African American women, their stamina and resilience are likely to be the reason for their determination (Pinson-Milburn, Fabian, Schlossberg, & Pyle, 1996), and could be used as a method of coping with the demands and challenges in their lives and in their caregiving role (Minkler & Roe, 1993). Having such determination contributes to their ability to form a positive identity and definition of self. Their resilience, problem solving techniques, coping abilities, and their adaptive worldviews indicate how they have the ability to survive (Kivett, 1993). Collins (1990) suggested that the importance of declaring independence, self reliance, self respect, and valuing their belief in their ability to empower themselves, is a positive enhancement for the family units headed by African American women. These beliefs are learned strategies that have probably been used in the AACGs' development as caregivers.

From the AACGs' perception, a singular factor or the combined factors of extended family structures, adaptable family roles, spiritual orientations, and cultural strengths could result in the enhancement of their coping skills. These are the characteristics of many African American families' basic functioning, including single, AACGs who are raising their grandchildren as a family unit.

Labels

According to hooks (1981), labeling and stereotyping African American women originated during slavery. It was a method used to discredit any effort made by slave women to distinguish themselves as feminine beings, since they were expected to perform hard labor or to do the same work that was assigned to slave men. They were expected to endure the same pain and hardship as slave men. Yet, they were also expected to have the ability to do household chores, cook, and rear children or to do "female" work. Having these attributes contradicted the southern White male's perception of women as being inferior, passive, and weak. To explain this was not only to proclaim that slave women were not "real" (hooks, p.71) women, but because of their abilities to work at doing tasks that were performed by both male and female slaves, new definitions were created to describe slave women who had "female" work assignments. The plantation owners had to find a way to distinguish the attributes and expectations of slave women from those of southern White women were considered (and even demanded) to be fragile, meek, and docile. The term "mammy" was created to describe a female slave who was domestically inclined. Following the end of slavery, the term "matriarch" became a progressive term to describe many single, African American

women who were former slaves and who headed their households. In other words, “mammy” graduated to “matriarch.”

Mammy

Historical accounts and slave narratives have revealed that not all slave women worked in the fields. West (1995) described a mammy as being one of the most insidious descriptors of African American women. Wallace (1990) contended that achieving the status of a mammy, as named by the plantation owner, was a way that slave women could distinguish themselves from the women who worked in the fields. In a sense, it probably was considered a step up in the slave hierarchy; a mammy was considered to be the most proclaimed faithful, obedient, and domestic servant. It was believed that mammies held a significant role in plantation households, particularly in the rearing and training of their young charges, the children of the plantation owners. White (1985) gave an historical account that a mammy was the slave woman considered able to do anything and everything, and who could do it better than anyone else. She was described as being an expert in all domestic matters and she was also the leader in the slave community. In the mind of the mammy, all other slaves, field and house workers, were considered to be her subordinates. Davis (1993) described the mammy as being a principal player in fulfilling the roles that required her to be an advisor, confidante, surrogate mistress, and mother to the plantation owner and his family. She was a strong and vigorous person, who fed, nurtured, kept family secrets, and literally ran the household. While she may have been a favorite in the slave owner’s household, she was expected to yield to subordination in the same manner as other slaves. The belief was that a mammy was the epitomized mother figure.

Conversely, Davis (1981) and Peterson (1992) refuted the belief that a mammy was one of the stereotypes presumed to capture the essence of the slave woman as a mother. In her historical research, Davis found that “ideological exaltation of motherhood did not extend to slaves” (p. 7); and in reality, not even to a mammy. According to Davis, because slave women were not considered to be women, they were not considered to be mothers. They were regarded as breeders, animals, and nonhuman beings where their value was monetary and this value was measured and determined by their ability to multiply in order to increase the slave owner’s wealth. The mammies were probably powerless slave women whose nurturing skills, as with the laboring skills of the female field workers, were valued more than their humanity and were viewed as self sacrificing comforters without needs of their own.

According to legend, while the mammy may have appeared to be overly loyal to the plantation owner, she may have also provided a useful service to the slave community. Wallace (1990) contended that the mammy usually carried news accounts and information of what she had overheard in the course of her work, to the slave quarters. She was probably a person who used her position to act as a covert motivator and intercessor to assist and protect not only herself, but other slaves, against sale, abuse, and other atrocities of the slave system (White, 1985).

Collins (1990) described a mammy as the “first controlling image of African American women” (p. 71). Mammy may have exuded power and authority over other slaves in a manner that earned her their respect because of her position in being aware of events that affected all of their lives.

In an article identifying historical images of African American women, West (1995) explained that the mammy image has impacted the mental and emotional functioning of many African American women. This image has continued to represent the economic and working condition of many African American women who work in low income occupations. White (1985) contended that the perpetuation of the mammy image offers conflict in the caregiving roles of the African American woman by increasing stress while attempting to balance multiple roles simultaneously as caregiver, participating in many activities in the home, perhaps in the church, and in her community. The image describes the African American woman's attempt to meet the needs of others while denying opportunities for herself as if she cannot be an advocate for her own needs. Still, to many African Americans, the term "mammy" is considered derogatory and degrading. The term is generally used in a manner that is meant to be insulting.

The Matriarch

Another controlling image described by Collins (1990) is the matriarch which "represents one of the normative yardsticks used to evaluate African American women's behavior" (p.71). The matriarch is a character that has been maligned as an emasculator of the African American male, yet is praised as a strong mother figure in African American culture. This can be seen when an African American male praises and describes his mother as a strong, courageous, and concerned mother figure and at the same time, views his wife with the same qualities, as being different, difficult, controlling, and unpleasant.

Bracey, Meier, and Rudwick (1970) refuted the notion that slavery was the cause of the maternal family as noted by some historians. They argued that the slave maternal-

based family tended to maintain some of the elements in the cultural endowment brought to the New World by West Africans. Here, the matriarch tradition was considered a remnant of an African custom. In agreement, and to what Dickerson (1995) referred to as a matrifocal family or a women-centered family, it was common in West Africa for a family to consist of a long line of female kin. The West African family included mothers, daughters, and their children, who shared a household and resources.

Since the plantation system did not differentiate between the sexes in exploiting slave labor, this characterization was probably intended to maintain a resemblance of the traditional role played previously by West African women. According to Bracey and colleagues, the slave woman was both the master and mistress of her cabin. Except for the interference of the plantation owner or the overseer, her wishes and decisions in regard to mating and other family matters, known as business of the cabin, were major. In many instances, hooks (1981) related that the slave woman did not have a true and sincere spirit of being subordinate to any masculine authority, whether or not the authority was instilled by economic necessity or tradition.

While plantation owners defined a slave family as consisting of only the mother and her children (White, 1985), the slave man or father was merely a slave with no defined attachments. This was probably done in order for the male slave to feel totally incapacitated in a role as husband and father. It appears that this led slave women to initiate and cultivate skills in self reliance and self sufficiency.

The exploitation of the matriarch term has led many to identify any woman with a family, who resides in a household where no male resides, as a matriarch (hooks, 1981). As the term applies to the African American woman, it perpetuates an image of her as a

nonfeminine, domineering, and powerful person. Ladner (1971) maintained that the term, matriarch, has become symbolic and that the label is often invalid. This is because many African American women play highly functional and sometimes autonomous roles within the family. From hooks' perspective, many African American women embrace the matriarch label as it allows them to regard themselves as somewhat privileged. What she referred to, is that many believe they have the privilege of being characterized by a term that is not as degrading as other derogatory terms used to describe African American women, such as the sexually promiscuous "Jezebel" or the hands on the hips, goose-necking, argumentative "Sapphire."

Many African American grandmothers, including AACGs, have embraced the image of the matriarch, according to Burton and Bengston (1985). The image is deeply entrenched in many commonly held beliefs regarding the matriarchal constructs of the African American family. That is because many grandmothers and older females are the dominant and the most influential members of the family—even when males (fathers, husbands, sons, and brothers) are present in the home.

The Strong Black Woman (SBW)

Myers (1980) argued that the matriarch label might appear to be insulting to some, but not necessarily to those African American women who might consider themselves to be strong Black women (SBWs).

Moynihan (1965), in The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, identified the SBW as the source of major problems in African American communities. In the section of the report titled "The Tangle of Pathology," he contended that the SBW heads the matriarchal structure found in the African American community, and is contradictory

to the male leadership role promoted in the majority of American society. This leads to a greater disadvantage because the minority group operates on one standard while the majority population, the one with the most advantages, operates on another. He concluded that the SBW, the matriarch, is a detriment to her community. Shedding light on this perception, Wallace (1990) interpreted Moynihan's meaning as:

The problem with Blacks was not so much White racism as it was an "abnormal family structure." This abnormal family structure made it nearly impossible for Blacks to benefit from and participate in the American power structure. And the primary feature of this abnormality was the "matriarch", the "strong black woman." (p. 31)

From another viewpoint, in her book, Ain't I a Woman (1981), hooks stated:

Most black women have not had the opportunity to indulge in the parasitic dependence upon the male that is expected of females and encouraged in patriarchal society. The institution of slavery forced black women to surrender any prior dependence on the male figure and obliged them to struggle for their individual survival. (p. 82)

It was and still is believed by many African Americans that economic and social conditions have not been, and perhaps will never be stable forces in their lives, especially for African American men. For this reason, early in development, many African American women internalize the message that they should not expect to rely on anyone else for their needs. They are taught that they must become fully self sufficient both emotionally and economically (Romero, 2000). Their ability to survive and cope depends on how well the lessons are learned (Collins, 1990; Peterson, 1992). For their survival, many African American women are taught in childhood to not only draw from but to also depend on their inner resources for their physical, emotional and mental strengths.

Some African American women have described the SBW as a woman who not only thrives on but is obsessed with overworking and overextending themselves as well

as over nurturing others. According to Collins (1990), a belief in the SBW concept or syndrome is one of a controlling image. It is an image that has been defined by the African American male, accepted and propagated by the African American woman, and preserved by general society.

One reason AACGs assume the caregiver role and believe they have the ability to be parents the second time around is probably an internalized perception of their sense of strength and resiliency. In defining themselves as SBWs, many African American women believe the conviction is the only thing they have that is unique to them, and many wear it as a “suit of armor” (Romero, 2000, p. 225). This means that it is not intended to shield them from adversities, but is used as a mechanism for coping with them. Many African American women who identify themselves as SBWs are provided with the assurance that they have the ability to manage and overcome life’s difficulties. This includes AACGs who take on the responsibility of raising their grandchildren.

In conducting a study of 30 young African American girls between the ages of 13 and 18 living in an inner city housing project, Ladner (1971) found the participants believed that they should learn how to be strong and to use this strength as a resource. The variable, “to be strong,” was not operationalized in the study. Ladner surmised that the girls were drawing on centuries of traditions in their attempt to conceptualize and emulate hard working women who were able to endure life’s hardships and difficulties. The young girls probably viewed this as the greatest image projected to them.

In another study, Shorter-Gooden and Washington (1996) found that a sense of strength emerged as an important element of self definition on late adolescent African American women. The words “strong,” “stronger,” or “strength” were revealed as identifying factors of self reference. The participants conveyed that they believed they

either had such qualities, that they were working to develop the qualities, or that they admired the characteristics of strength in those women who had the most impact on their identity development. The respondents defined strengths as the determination and the capacity to deal with the difficulties associated with being African American. It also meant that having a strong sense of self would not be obscured by them and could not be ignored by others. Having strength was a vital component of their self identities. The emergent theme implied that the study participants' goals were to identify as SBWs.

The Strong Black Woman—A Detrimental “Myth”?

Believing in the SBW concept has helped the African American woman remain steadfast against problematic situations such as dual oppressions of racism and sexism, and perhaps even classism (Ladner, 1971; Romero, 2000). Belief in the concept also helps to maintain a sense of strength and perseverance (Davis, 1981). Internalizing the thought is what causes the African American woman to be unable to acknowledge feelings of pain, weaknesses, and inner turmoil (McNair, 1992). Romero contended that while it keeps the African American woman from falling victim to her own despair that can be recognized by others, internalizing the belief also disguises her vulnerabilities. Also, internalizing the concept does not allow the acknowledgement or display of emotions such as anger, resentment, fear, shame, pride, and loneliness. In essence, many African American women show others only what they want seen. Internalizing the belief gives an illusion of control that prevents the African American woman from identifying her needs and reaching out for help.

Romero (2000) further declared that it is often the physical kind of strength and caring for one's body that is neglected by those who try to live up to the SBW image. Like a magnet, presenting an appearance of being a SBW draws in others' problems that

produce additional inner turmoil and stress (McNair, 1992). This implies that a belief in the SBW concept is a complex and potentially harmful myth and a descriptive stereotype. Because of the internalization of this image, any attempt to invalidate it throws a significant emotional and mental toll on African American women who embrace the belief (Greene, 1994; West, 1995). African American scholars, psychologists, feminist authors, and others have suggested that the SBW concept is a stereotypical myth. These scholars and others maintain that such a perception should not be viewed as a reality in the lives of African American women. The perception should be debunked, mainly because of its mental and physical detriments to many African American women's well being (Boyd-Franklin, 1991; Collins, 1990; Lewis, 1999; McNair, 1992; Naylor, 2000; Romero, 2000). Although scholars and others suggest the SBW concept is a myth, they also believe that many African American women perceive the belief in the concept as having power. They suggested that the power of the concept lies in its internalization; therefore, many African American women do not perceive it as a myth. After all, how can a strong belief in something be perceived as a myth? Many AACGs have relied on viewing themselves SBWs to be reassured of their ability to successfully raise their grandchildren, a belief often against what others think are impossible odds. Like many African American women, AACGs who perceive themselves as SBWs are provided with an emotional benefit that sustains them. Rather than debunk the concept as a myth, it can be perceived as a source of inner strength and can be considered a tool or asset for AACGS, in providing care for the children in their custody.

Bell-Scott (1994) suggested that while there has been a constant struggle to continually defy other culturally imposed negative identities, it is more difficult for many

African American women to relinquish the alleged SBW label. They want to continue to believe it is real and not a myth. Many believe that the SBW perspective is theirs to own regardless of the damages that could be caused because of its internalization. Despite her posture against embracing a belief in the SBW concept, in describing crises and perhaps suffering, hooks (1990) affirmed herself as being enraptured by “the knowledge that we can take our pain, work with it, recycle it, and transform it so that it becomes a source of power” (p. 203). This is not to imply that women of other racial and ethnic groups do not have difficult experiences, or do not have the internalized perception that lead them to identify themselves as being strong women. The essential difference for many African American women, as Romero (2000) asserted, is their development of self images created from the system of slavery and from the social construction of labeling.

Myers (1980) inferred from her study of 400 African American women describing their perceptions of their coping abilities, that what others perceive as internalized false strength may need to be examined more closely. The findings indicated that the SBW label is simply a phrase, and does not necessarily imply that the label means the same thing to each African American woman.

Peterson (1992) conducted a study of 15 African American women who were age 30 and older, and varied in educational attainment and socioeconomic status. These women shared their stories of overcoming significant obstacles, poverty, abuse, racism, and other life misfortunes. Each participant described and emphasized their interpretations of inner self will, determination, perseverance, and fortitude as means to prevail over life’s difficulties. Each identified herself as being a SBW. None were described as thinking they were superhuman who were always ready, willing, and able to

tolerate any and all things for everybody. According to Peterson, all study participants revealed they never had illusions that life for them would be easy. The emergent theme was that they had learned from their mothers, or an individual who was influential in their youth, to always remain strong, be prepared to face adversities, and be able to handle them. The SBW image might be culturally imposed, but it could also be an image that is individually influenced and defined.

Many years ago Erikson (1966), using the term of the time to describe African Americans, asked the question and responded with “Can Negro culture afford to have the ‘strong mother’ stereotyped as a liability? These mothers have put an indelible mark on ‘Negro culture’ and what they accomplished should be one of the proudest chapters in cultural history” (p. 162).

Concepts

The Womanist

White (1985) declared that historically, many African American women had to develop and maintain strong characteristics of self reliance and self sufficiency. These characteristics date back to the days of slavery when slaved males’ protection and active involvement in the family were systemically absent. This lack of protection and family involvement created a basis for slave women to cultivate strengths and self reliance. Mainly, the slave women functioned in groups. Therefore, the influence and resolve of the group became a reliable source from which each group member could withdraw sustenance in order to survive. As group members, they came to appreciate each member’s skills, talents, and sisterly relationships. Collectively, they shared their

individual strengths, talents, and skills and were able overcome some of the turmoil associated with slave life.

In Alice Walker's In Search of My Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose (1983), a womanist is defined as a "self identified and self defined woman of color and committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (p. xi). The term, womanist, could have originated from the word "womanish" or "womlish." These two terms were and still are used by many African Americans to describe a young girl who is considered to be acting mature or trying to be mature "before her time" or as in "being sassy." This implies that such an individual asserts her perceived maturity in a manner that will draw attention to her.

There are multiple meanings for the term womanist or womanism as there are for the term Black feminist or Black feminism. These definitions have been formed or developed in the minds of individual scholars, literary authors, and perhaps with women who have certain advantaged opportunities. The meanings are represented according to how each individual uses the concepts. Therefore there are diverse meanings. Also, many African American women who promote the womanist view are intellectually freedomed scholars and researchers who seek to broaden the meaning of feminism (Collins, 1990; Hayes, 1995; Hudson-Weems, 1997; Phillips & McCaskill, 1995; Rodriguez, 2003; Williams, 1999).

Williams (1999) characterized one aspect of womanism as a perspective that describes the more personal qualities that are rooted in a particular group of people, as opposed to laying emphasis on the group's resistance to oppression. Williams declared that womanism includes having reliance on women-centered networks for emotional and

spiritual support. Like Williams, Hayes (1995) defined a womanist as one who is self-reliant and uses the strengths of her African heritage to connect with other women in similar circumstances in order to develop strategies for emotional and spiritual support.

For this study, a womanist was defined as an “updated” SBW. Here, a womanist was defined as one who recognized that her individual strengths were a necessary component for a group effort.

Afrocentrism and Afrocentric

According to Dickerson (1995), the culture of poverty argument was used in both academic and policy research in an attempt to validate society’s treatment of low income, female headed families. Unfortunately, the outcome of this type of research that included assessments, theories, practices, policies and behaviors, often perpetuated the myths and stereotypes that surround African American women, especially African American single mothers and grandmothers. Consequently, major stakeholders such as community members, and society as a whole, can be deprived of their various contributions. Dickerson suggested that one way to remedy this, in studying a particular group, is to acquire a better understanding of the group’s members by centering the realities of the group members’ experiences and perspectives. Afrocentric research utilizes a centered approach (Asante, 1990).

Afrocentrism is both an ideology and a form of centrism that describes a subconscious attitude that is grounded in an African ancestral heritage found among many African Americans (Akbar, 1984; Dickerson, 1995; Hoskins, 1992). It is based on the belief that the culture, history, and past and present experiences of African Americans are unique because as the descendents of African people, they have retained components

of their African culture (Kershaw, 1992). Afrocentricity is a concept that is expressed as a way of thinking. A number of afrocentrist scholars define afrocentricity as a paradigm that offers alternative explanations for specific cultural behaviors (Akbar, 1984; Asante, 1990; Reviere, 2001; Schiele, 1994). These explanations tend to describe and explain a shared collective value system, experiences, personalities, and actions of the members of a particular culture. Specifically, for African Americans and people of African descent of the Diasporas, it encompasses the beliefs, feelings, moods, and attitudes of this particular group of people (Hoskins, 1992 & Morgan 1991) and these perspectives are understood according to the cultural meanings and values of the group. Accordingly, the group's worldview is conceptualized in terms of the group's culture and history (Dickerson, 1995).

According to Asante (1988), afrocentric-based research positions study participants, their distinct culture, their givens, truths, beliefs, and realities from the margins to the center of inquiry and not merely on the edges of periphery. Asante (1990) avowed that location is “the place” (p. 5) in afrocentric research and “all knowledge results from an occasion of encounter in place,” (p. 5). This means that African based ideals, values, culture, and behavior are positioned at the center or core of a study. In centering, afrocentrism takes into account that members of a culture or group can be better understood, according to their own expressed cultural meanings, their attitudes, beliefs, and values (Dickerson, 1995).

Schiele (1996) defined afrocentricity, in a social science context, as a paradigm that can explain the behavior of any cultural and ethnic group; however, he perceived it as a paradigm that mostly reflects the cultural and basic characteristics of many African

Americans. He expressed the concept as an emerging, important paradigm that is very useful in social work practice. Relating to social work research, Schiele (2000) maintained that while an afrocentric paradigm is asserted or affirmed by using conventional African based philosophical assumptions, using the paradigm in social work research is very useful in addressing the needs and concerns of African Americans and others of African ancestry. This is because afrocentric social work encompasses and transpires from the cultural traditions and the experiences of people of African descent.

Afrocentric Principal Areas of Inquiry

Schiele (1994) claimed that the principal categories of afrocentric inquiry or assumptions have characteristics that are cosmological, ontological, and epistemological. Also, in afrocentric research, all phenomena, knowledge inquiry and analysis contain at least one or more categories of an afrocentric inquiry. Asante (1990) also included an axiological inquiry.

Cosmology, in the afrocentric sense, represents a collective viewpoint of myths, traditions, values, habits, visions, and outlooks. An afrocentric cosmology is a shared cultural belief that describes how worldly things are interconnected and interrelated. It is often expressed in African and African American folklore, literature, religion, prayer, spirituals (religious theme-based songs), and spirituality. There is a connection, in an afrocentric sense, of self, of community, and generally what it means to exist; those things that inform collectively, such as beliefs, truths, and values (M.K. Asante, personal communication, February 20, 2004). Though interconnectedness and interrelatedness do not reject the concept of individuality, afrocentrically, there is a sense of collective identity and belief that acknowledges that an individual cannot be fully and completely understood beyond their social or cultural background (Schiele, 2000).

Ontology is defined as the nature of truth and reality (Creswell, 1994). Basically, it is how one views the world or a worldview perception. Akbar (1984) and Nobles (1980) described afrocentric ontology as taking into account, all elements of the universe. It means being more spiritual, rather than materialistic, which is also considered, but not as much as a spiritual element. Closely related to cosmology, afrocentric ontology in a broad sense, is attributed to the recognition of a system of beliefs in an existence, in relationships with self and with others, as well as with the universe. That is, all and everything are created from the same spiritual substance. In other words, it is a higher power or a Creator that provides a spiritual force or essence in all things. This makes all things interconnected (Schiele, 1996) in a collective realm and as a continuous circle. Schiele asserted that this type of circle signifies that collectively, the individual is spiritually and socially connected along with others. Afrocentric ontology also relates to a belief in the unseen (Akbar, 1984); it is a belief that just because something is not visible to the eye does not mean that it does not exist.

Epistemologically, afrocentricity places significant emphasis in an effective way of obtaining and demonstrating knowledge. It is a compelling source of knowing (Akbar, 1984; Asante, 1988; Schiele, 1994). The focus is on intuition, context, and felt relationships between concepts and beliefs and what is ongoing in the real world. Reviere (2001) stated, “human actions cannot be understood apart from the emotions, attitudes, and cultural definitions of a given context” (p. 17). There must be a connectedness, an attachment, or a sense of feeling. Akbar (1984) related that the most direct experience of self expression is through emotion or affect, and that a display of emotional reactions as a method of knowing and as a balance for reasoning, is valid.

The axiology perspective represents a combination of cosmology, ontology, and epistemology, centering on collectivity, spirituality, and affect (Schiele, 2000). These underscore basic afrocentric values. Asante (1990) informed that the afrocentric axiology bears meaning on what is considered good values and what is valuable. In an afrocentric perspective, the contention is that afrocentric axiology exemplifies the characteristics, values or ethos, principals, and standards of ethics. For example, afrocentrically, physical looks do not necessarily determine whether someone is beautiful or unattractive. A common expression among many African Americans is *beauty is as beauty does* or *beauty is as beauty acts*, meaning how that person is viewed by others. Within this cultural framework, a person is beautiful because his or her actions are good. A person who does good deeds, who is a caring and compassionate person, is a beautiful person. Nobles (1990) described an afrocentric axiology as the assumption that all behavior is directed by a sense of goodness, a belief that there is good in everybody. An afrocentric axiology also prescribes to what is considered as right conducts or correct behaviors, such as sharing, caring, forgiving, and helping.

Rationale for a Qualitative Study

The literature informed that it is stereotypical information about African American women that often hides what is actually the reality of their experiences (Collins, 1990; McNair, 1992; Minkler & Roe, 1993; Romero, 2000). Therefore, the information about African American women that is provided by the stereotypes causes others to come to false conclusions about the challenges and quality of their lives. As Dickerson (1995) emphasized, because opinions about African American woman are often distorted by influences of prejudices and stereotypical labels, it is imperative to listen to what the AACGs have to say about their lives and their every day experiences.

West (1995) contended that exploring African American women's cultural reality by inquiring about their unique experiences can produce both self disclosure and respect for their backgrounds. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative strategy was adopted.

According to Creswell (1998), qualitative studies are selected when variables are not as easily defined or identified, and concepts are not always easily explained or available to describe, in order to understand the behavior of study participants. In exploring the phenomenon of the SBW concept and parenting grandchildren from the single AAGs' perspective, and because the main point of the research questions begins with "how" do they do it, utilizing a qualitative method of study was appropriate.

According to Patton (1990), qualitative designs are used for exploratory research in areas where very little is known. Based on their historical experiences, the struggles to project the voices of African American women have often failed (Gibson, 1999). In order to shape and inform their experiences, it was anticipated that qualitative research methods could accurately capture what would be diverse and complex topics and subtopics, themes and subthemes, surrounding the phenomena of the concepts and their relationships.

The Research Questions

Throughout history, many African American women have remained resilient and have clung to their cultural heritage in spite of enormous assaults on their humanity and horrific levels of social and economic deprivation. Through it all, they have maintained their self definitions (Peterson, 1992); however, there are possibilities that many African

American women have behaviors and experiences that researchers and members of the helping professions could misinterpret (McNair, 1992).

Historically, African American mothers, along with mothers of other ethnic groups and cultures, who are low income and single, are recognized as members within the disadvantaged groups that reflect their gender, race, age, and economic status (Almquist, 1995; Dickerson, 1995; Peterson, 1992). The same applies to AACGs. Given these and other disadvantages, how do the AACGs manage their roles of parenting grandchildren and what inspires them to assume and maintain their roles?

Dickerson (1995) related that a central conceptual framework such as an afrocentric approach to methodology and inquiry is the best approach to use in order to determine the research questions. The central research questions that guided the research were: (1) How did these the single, middle aged, and elderly AACGs who reside in an inner city area known for its high volume of crime and gang activity, illicit drug movement, among other society's ills, cope with the responsibility of parenting grandchildren? How did they manage? (2) Did the participants perceive themselves as SBWs? If so, was the perception of being SBWs the driving force that motivated them to believe that they have the ability to raise their grandchildren? How did having this perception keep them focused on their caregiving responsibilities? How did the participants define the SBW? What were the origins of this perception as it related to them? If there was not a perception of being an SBW, then how did they do it?

(3) Intended specifically for focus group discussions, what were their opinions and feelings regarding AACGs in their community collaborating collectively? Did they believe that they could collaborate collectively as a group in order to support each other,

combining their strengths and methods of resilience, and sharing their coping mechanisms? Could they describe the benefits of such collaboration efforts? If they did not feel that a collaborative effort was not beneficial, then why not?

Summary

The literature review informed the historical cultural traditions of many African Americans. In addition to the extended family networks and kinship bonds, the traditions included a strong sense of spirituality and what was believed to be cultural strengths and flexible coping skills that represent the remnants of an African tradition. The literature supported the argument that there is a correlation between many African Americans and an African culture in terms of their beliefs, experiences, behaviors, actions, and values such as the correlation between the traditional and a current commitment to the extended family. Though certainly not all, many African American families do exist within the scope of the extended family rather than within a separate nuclear family unit. This provides the interrelationship and connectiveness in a circular mode of existence. There is the inherent ability to manipulate role changes and flexibility and when necessary, to assume responsibility and care for the well being of others.

There was evidence that the impact of slavery has done much to shape the behavior of many African Americans. The tradition of slavery also created the stereotypes and perceptions of African American women, including AACGs, as they are seen today. The literature shows how labeling can affect and harm many African American women. The literature suggested that African American women such as the AACGs, should be identified, valued, and understood within the context of their experiences. There is a need to know how and why they behave in the manner that they

do. There is a need to know what motivates them and what are the compelling forces used in their ability to cope with raising their grandchildren.

As an ideology relating to a social framework, afrocentrism explains the beliefs and values that many AACGs have. The literature made inferences that this form of centrism was the most effective approach to use in order to develop a structure of understanding related to the AACGs experiences and behaviors. Implications in the literature have not included African American women, who are described as ordinary, everyday, community women and who have not chartered paths toward defining themselves as feminists, Black feminists, or womanists. Basically, the AACGs' experiences, values, and beliefs have not been systemically investigated. What have been investigated are the causes of the AACG phenomenon and the identity of sources that are prevailing stressors and stress outcomes that they encounter. The literature did not indicate that AACGs have been given voice or a forum to project their feelings, experiences, and beliefs, though the literature did reflect the beliefs and values of African American women in general. The literature review related to the womanist and afrocentric concepts, and did provide perspectives and ideas for the design of a methodology. Using this sociocultural construct produced a study that was as eclectic as it was tailored and maximized access to knowledge generated by the AACGs.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

An Afrocentric Method

According to Carlton-LaNey (2000), the best way to assist AACGs who may require services and interventions is to incorporate an afrocentric perspective with intervention strategies that are fundamental in identifying and building on their strengths. Believing this to be true, it was surmised that an effective research study involving the AACG study participants could be obtained by using an afrocentric perspective as well.

Without using this approach, problems could have been encountered when attempting to encourage prospective study participants to talk about their experiences, to explain their realities, and to describe how they define themselves. Etter-Lewis (1993) declared that with many African Americans, in telling their stories, their narratives, explanations, or their dialogue in general, the context could often be described as being “above and below the surface” (p. 155)—it all depends on who is listening. This means that some African Americans may opt to disclose information in a manner that is acceptable to the way that they believe general society or the public would perceive the information. In actuality, the person who is listening to the disclosures must go below or scratch the surface in order to discern the meanings of the information, narratives, or stories. According to Carroll (1994), this is known as window dressing, a distinctively

conversational style attributed to many African Americans. This is a technique used when a person may or may not mind disclosing information but will disclose information in a manner that does not yield an obvious meaning. One would need to “scratch the surface” in order to be able to comprehend the meaning.

Stereotypical information is often the only available information about African American women (Dickerson, 1995) as the socialization history of many African Americans depicts the practice of not disclosing information about themselves, especially to outsiders such as those who are not of their race. African American communities often use the saying, “Watch, as well pray.” This is an adaptation of a Bible verse that translates to mean keeping one’s eyes and ears open and one’s mouth closed.

Schiele (1996) declared that a component of an afrocentric methodology in social work research involves identifying the values and practices that help contribute to the survival of a group of people who have experienced oppression and discrimination. Reviere (2001) asserted that in order to do this, all of the research participants including the researcher should be centered in place. As study participants, the AACGs had their values, behaviors, cultural meanings, attitudes, feelings, experiences, and beliefs placed at the center of the study. I was able to place my own ideals, values, beliefs, and experiences at the center of inquiry.

Kershaw (1992) alluded that an afrocentric methodology produces cultural-based knowledge that places emphasis on the past, present, and future realities of African American people—this applied to the participants in this study. One reason for using this approach was to generate raw narratives to provide needed information to helping professionals and policy makers to assume an interest in recognizing, respecting, and

using the wisdom and inner strengths of the participants. Using this approach was also to elicit knowledge to provide tools the AACGs' could use in their individual and collective efforts to build on and share their strengths and resilience.

This study did not adhere to a strictly preferred methodological approach, but rather to an eclectic type approach as an afrocentric methodology did not limit the researcher to an isolated means of inquiry or analysis that could have a superior status in gathering and analyzing data. While this methodological approach presented a unique way to obtain knowledge, it was not to be considered universal for all AACGs or for all African Americans. This approach offered the methodology that was believed to be more conducive for a close study of the grandmothers in this study.

An Introspective Examination

Prior to beginning the research, I explored my own cultural values and worldviews—I wanted to find out who I really was. In order to do this, I had to recall what I had learned about life as an African American. I had to draw on my beliefs, learning experiences, knowledge, and even wisdom acquired over my own lifetime. I did this by making notes in a journal as I reflected on my experiences growing up mostly in an inner city, segregated community, and during visits to the South prior to the civil rights movement. I was raised by my grandmother and recalled the life values I acquired during my childhood such as maintaining self reliance, working twice as hard for positive accomplishments, and getting an education. I called up those things learned from the women I have known and what I remembered from knowing single, African American women in my family and in my community who I considered to be SBWs.

As Reviere (2001) recommended, I had to be able to describe reality from my perspective. That is, I had to think about what I had learned from the intense spirituality prevalent in my family as well as the close family ties and extended family and kinship bonds that were not. I thought about the ability to cope with adversities in life and about all of this related to me. I had to remember the role change I had to make at a very young age when I was given the responsibility of being a mother figure to my three younger siblings. I had to recollect others describing my controlling nature and how I have tried to “mother” everybody. I thought about which ways I considered have made me a SBW. I recalled some of the events in my adult life: marriage, divorce, the relationships, raising two children, being a single mother, remarrying, and becoming a widow who continues to grieve.

First, I needed to develop a plan to approach the grandmothers although, as an African American woman, I was confident I would not have problems. I believed if I could adjust my mannerisms and my vernacular to mirror each grandmother during the recruitment and interviewing process, I would have successful recruitment efforts and subsequent interviews.

As Asante (1990) suggested, I made written notes about my beliefs and thoughts about grandmothers raising their grandchildren, what I believed were their thoughts on being able to cope, their perspectives of their strengths, and how they would narrate their life experiences. I anticipated that for most, if not all, their belief and trust in God would be the mainstay, giving them their major coping mechanism. I thought that each one would consider she was the epitome of strength because of the adversities and hardships she may have had to endure. Regardless, I thought they would feel able to maintain their

strong faith in God even when confronted with what they considered to be the utmost struggles.

I did take on an AACG role for a short while prior to engaging in the study. I thought I would probably take on the responsibility if needed again, but that I would not ever want to. My thoughts about this way of thinking caused me to perceive myself as being a selfish person. To soothe the self criticism, I remembered feeling I was always there for others. However, I also felt resentment because I believed no one had ever been there for me. Then I attempted to measure and count instances in my life of what I had done for others and what others had done for me. Therefore, in my mind, I was not selfish at all. I was looking for parity. Having those self critical thoughts and being able to quickly erase them and to substitute them for perceived “good thoughts” about myself caused me to believe I was a SBW. I could deny that I had ever had such critical thoughts about myself and then believe it.

I believed I would be familiar enough with the grandmothers’ histories that were probably similar, their language, mannerisms, superstitions, and myths, and that this would offer me cultural and social immersion with the participants, which is necessary for an afrocentric study (Asante, 1990). I expected that I would share their emotions and feelings. Before the study began, I felt that I had admiration for the prospective participants and I also believed they had tremendous courage to do the caregiving jobs that they have assumed.

The Westside

The study participants lived in an area known as the Westside, in Las Vegas, Nevada. The Westside is a blighted, urban ghetto and an illegal drug infested, gang

populated community. There are tremendous dangers in this neighborhood. From the 1930s until well into the 1960s, Las Vegas was known as the “Mississippi of the West,” so called to emulate comparison to the overt racial divide that was predominant in the state of Mississippi and other southern states prior to the Civil Rights Movement in the 60s (Soul of America, 2001). The Westside community was established in the early 1940s when African Americans were displaced from the downtown Las Vegas area where many had settled after arriving from the southern states to work at a magnesium supply plant. According to historical accounts, local business owners and others from out of state recognized the potential of downtown Las Vegas as prime real estate for building casinos and hotels. Most of the displaced African Americans were encouraged to relocate to an area known as “across the tracks.” The Westside became famous as the place where celebrated African American entertainers had to seek room and board after performing downtown or on the Las Vegas Strip. They were not allowed to room, dine, or participate in activities in the casinos and hotels (Las Vegas History X, 1999).

A railroad underpass separates the Westside from downtown Las Vegas. For many years, its inhabitants referred to the area as “living behind the concrete curtain”—and the curtain was considered to be solid. Other areas of the city were developed and received the infrastructure required to become a bustling metropolis; however, for years, the Westside was, and still remains greatly ignored by city planners (Las Vegas History X, 1999). The Westside consists of public housing apartments and other low income apartments; some older, but well maintained homes; and many homes that are abandoned and boarded up. Situated there are a bank, a library, a senior citizens’ center, and a Boys and Girls Club. There is also Agassi’s College Preparatory School which is open to all

city students; the West Las Vegas Arts and Cultural Center; three elementary schools; a fast food restaurant; and a few small community markets although there is not a major supermarket in the area. There are a multitude of churches of several denominations and one Mosque frequented by members of the Nation of Islam (formerly known as the Black Muslims). I have counted eight churches located in one two-block area. Every community in Las Vegas has a middle school and a high school with the exception of the Westside area. The Westside high school students are bused to high schools in other areas of the city. With the slightest rainfall, the streets of Las Vegas flood very quickly and become very dangerous for driving and walking. Ironically, during rainfalls, the streets on the Westside do not flood at all.

Recruiting the Participants

For writing the report, I gave the participants pseudonyms. I chose to limit my search for participants who lived in the Westside community of Las Vegas, Nevada because of the concentration of African Americans who live there. I knew the area had a large number of AAGs because a Westside elementary school principal had previously advised me that many of her students resided in homes where their grandmother is the head of the household and where their parents were absent.

This principal was to be a key in opening the door for me to locate and interview participants and she had offered me the use of her school's conference room to conduct interviews. However, before I presented the study proposal and prior to receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), she was transferred to another school in an area far away from the Westside but she did direct me to other key persons that I could contact. I contacted the new principal as well as another principal at a second

elementary school located in the community. I was also directed to the West Las Vegas Arts and Cultural Center in the community which is where the children come to participate in various activities and usually, their parents or grandparents bring them. The new principal at the first elementary school was not receptive to assisting me in locating AACGs. We discussed her helping me navigate through the proper school administration channels, and the fact that approval might or might not be granted. She indicated that she was already overwhelmed with responsibilities and felt helping me would be an additional burden. Although she was supportive of my intentions, she was not willing to exert herself further. I understood her feelings and felt that as I had other options, this was not a great disappointment.

Following IRB approval, I sought and received permission from the managers of three public housing projects to post a flyer on their tenant bulletin boards. I left flyers with the director of the West Las Vegas Arts and Cultural Center (WLVACC). The director allowed me to set up a table and posters in the lobby at the WLVACC so that I could also pass out flyers there. I left flyers with the principal of the second elementary school who promised to personally give copies to the AACGs that she knew. The flyers indicated that the prospective participants should contact me by phone so that an appointment time could be set for interviewing and for further explanation and information. Each participant was given a \$10 grocery certificate for the individual interview and another for participating in the focus group discussions.

I mailed letters and flyers to 30 churches in the community, requesting volunteers, and indicating the criteria for participation in the study. The letters were to be read during the time for announcements at Sunday morning worship services. I stood outside an ethnic based community market and distributed flyers to people going in and out of the

store. Although the location was busy with store customers, this area was also congested with drug sellers and buyers, panhandlers, and others who simply “hung out” in the area. It was not my favorite place to recruit but I knew that many people, including senior citizens, frequented the market.

I had expected to recruit at least 15 single, grandmothers whose grandchildren resided with them without the presence of either parent in the home. Their ages were to vary from age 38 and older. It was expected that they would reside on the Westside.

I received many telephone calls from grandmothers willing to participate in the study. Most did not reside on the Westside. Some stated that their children (the grandchildren’s parents) resided in the home. Some were married or had significant others in the home who contributed to the support of the household and the grandchildren. Some stated that they did not have the time to devote to a lengthy interview even when they were told that the interview did not have to be completed in one session. One prospective participant did not believe that I was a student attempting a research project. She accused me of being a disreputable person or a scam artist.

I attended the grand opening of a Housing and Urban Development (HUD) federally financed apartment complex offering low-rent housing to senior citizens. There were separate units reserved for grandparents and the grandchildren they are raising but at that time, there were no grandparent applicants or residents. On that day, no one was present at the grand opening except a local television station reporter and crew, the leasing agent, and me. The leasing agent gave me permission to place flyers and informed consent forms in the lobby that gave more details about the study. The television reporter interviewed me and I explained the purpose of my study and why there

was an increase in grandparent caregiving. That evening, the impromptu interview was featured on the television station's nightly news program. Later I revisited the complex. According to the leasing agent, two families had moved in and there were others on the waiting list, waiting for the completion of a required investigation. I knocked on the doors of the two occupants, identified myself, explained what I was doing there, and requested their participation in the study. Both AACGs declined to be interviewed.

The Participants

The participants in the study were selected by using purposive sampling. According to Patton (1990), with this type of sampling, participants are selected because of unique characteristics that are similar to each sample member. The sampling purpose is to maximize information. Also, it is used to study the lived experiences of a specific population.

Eleven grandmothers, all single women, agreed to be interviewed. One of the eleven telephoned me to schedule an appointment to be interviewed. Unfortunately for me, I was unable to schedule an immediate appointment. This grandmother belonged to the Nation of Islam and I was ecstatic that she had agreed to an interview. I did not know anything about the Nation of Islam's members other than they are African Americans. I was eager and looked forward to the interview as I would have learned a lot from this lady. I believed that there is a vast difference in the worldview of Black Muslims as they were formerly called and many African Americans, as a collective group. Relative to African Americans, I knew that there were cultural differences in the behaviors, values, beliefs, experiences, concerns and other variables that I was seeking from study participants. However, when I called back to schedule an appointment, I did not receive

an answer. After calling many times, trying to contact her, I learned that the prospective participant's telephone had been disconnected and I did not have her address. I was very disappointed. Therefore, I was left with 10 study participants.

Paradigm Guiding Research

According to Akbar (1984), "methodologies make sense only in the light of the models that breed them" (p. 399). An afrocentric, womanist epistemology underpinned this study. This paradigm is shaped by afrocentric philosophical assumptions that determined the range of concepts, theories, methods of data collection, and the analyses that were used in the study. For this study, the afrocentric, womanist epistemology paradigm is characterized by a concern for the qualities of strength, resilience, perseverance, and power that describes the experiences of ordinary African American women like the grandmothers in this study. It was intended to reflect the everyday life experiences of the grandmothers within a cultural and gender context and to place their experiences at the center or core of the study. This means that all processes and procedures relating to concepts and research were centered in the participants' understandings, their life experiences, and their life chances (Kershaw, 2003).

Assuming that many African American women have access to both afrocentric and womanist perspectives, an alternative paradigm that could best explain these concurrent cultural realities and could reflect elements of both traditions, was called for here. Such concurrent and intersecting perspectives create a separate paradigm.

Research Design

This descriptive and exploratory study was designed to give voice to those African American women who represent the less privileged African American women;

those African American women who were not considered high academic achievers or affluent accomplished. The design of the study was devised to explore and describe the experiences and feelings of single African American Custodial Grandmothers (AACGs), and to explore and explain their coping mechanisms, and the sources of their strength and resilience. It was also designed to initiate a strengths based group that could lead to a collaborative effort in problem solving and support. The design consisted of a descriptive approach to narrative inquiry based on data from individual interviews and an afrocentric initiative based on data acquired from focus group discussions.

Afrocentric Narrative Inquiry

Marshall and Rossman (1999) defined a narrative inquiry in a study, as one that is based on the narratives of the participants' experiences and life stories. They further described a narrative inquiry as a collaboration of the relationship between the researcher and the participant. This type of inquiry mirrors the oral tradition of an Afrocentric perspective that, according to Asante (1988), carries the assumption that people's realities are constructed through the narration of their experiences as related through their life stories. Asante asserted that in this tradition, this perspective is described by the descriptive spoken accounts and preservations of knowledge and wisdom, passed from one generation to the next of a people's cultural history and ancestry. Additionally, an afrocentric perspective places emphasis on the views of the participants' lives in a holistic manner. Akbar (1984) alluded that including the standards of an afrocentric inquiry in a holistic manner involves the total person—a full range of what many African Americans consider to be total human dimensions, including physical, mental, and spiritual expressions as well as oral transmissions.

As Morrow, Rakhsha, and Castañeda (2001) related, the narrative inquiry offered a connection with the grandmothers' life stories. The inquiry made it possible for the researcher to capture, and for study participants to communicate, strong cultural content and implications. Following the tenets of the afrocentric philosophy, the afrocentric narrative inquiry focused on the individual and the context of the person's lived experiences and placed them in the center of the inquiry.

An Afrocentric Initiative for a Strengths Based Collective

In a focus group setting, how the participants matched certain conditions with successful problem solving techniques, such as using successful coping strategies, represented knowledge that allowed for control. This knowledge is emancipatory in nature (Kershaw, 1992). Afrocentric values and a collective approach were an integral part of this methodology. In this sense, this part of the research design can be described as a modified action research design. It was not the intention to engage in a research study and simultaneously solve a problem or to engage the participants in all phases of the study as action research dictates. I did not intend to try to act as a change agent or was the intention to provide a process of empowerment to the participants (Fine, 1992). I intended to initiate a course of thought whereby the participants could empower themselves individually and collectively, and could use a group effort to generate emancipatory knowledge, or to engage in mutual aid to each other.

Data Collection from Individual Interviews

Most of the interviews lasted at least 90 minutes. Except for demographic and leading, prepared questions initiated by the researcher, the interviews were informal and unstructured, allowing the participants free expression.

According to Dickerson (1995), the afrocentric-collected data must come from the participants' perspective. Data collection involved indepth interviews, participant observations, life histories, as well as the uncovering and interpreting the meanings of myths, symbols, distinctive phrases, patterns and rhythms of speech (Asante, 1990). I began each interview with an introduction of who I was and why I was doing the study, though this information was included in the consent form. I gave a brief history about myself, telling where I was born and raised. This was done to create an atmosphere of ease and comfort. I told them about some of my life's experiences. They seemed to appreciate that I was a grandmother and that at a time in my life, I had also been a single parent.

Centering for the study involved assessing how the grandmothers described their lives, past and present, and how they described what they thought their lives should have been. Additionally, a description of what the participants perceived as barriers that limited their chances to live the way they would like to live also qualified the data collection place as centered (Kershaw, 2003).

The interviews were conversation type interviews. If the conversations became intense, the participant and I were able to recognize the passion of the intensity and we were able to diffuse it with a positive justification or explanation.

The Informed Consent

Each participant was offered a Consent for an Individual Interview form. Some of the participants asked me to read the form to them. They all stated that they understood and signed the form. Later, they received a copy of the signed form. With each participant's permission, the interview was audio taped. One participant refused to

be audio taped. She signed the form but wrote under her signature that she and I understood that her interview was not being audio taped. Initial and subsequent interviews with this participant were recorded manually.

The informed consent indicated how the data would be treated and stored while in my possession and what would happen to the tapes following completion of the study. For confidentiality purposes, the informed consent included the statement that tapes and written information would not identify the participant by name or physical description.

Watching—Observation of the Participants

Afrocentric-collected data involve total immersion in the culture of the people being studied (Asante, 1990). I am a member of the cultural ethnic group of the participants studied. We share a culture and perhaps a historical shared way of life. This form of data collection offered an opportunity for me to observe, and mentally record their behavior and events as they occurred during the interview process. By doing this, I was able to define the nature of my own reality, while listening to stories, quotes, and themes as the words of the participants unfolded. The participants made certain verbal and nonverbal cues or made verbal rhythms of speech (vibes) that I was able to interpret and respond to as they occurred.

Interviewing—Asking and Listening

The interviews were guided by a flexible, iterative, continuous design as defined by Morrow and Smith (2000). This type of interview design was adjusted as the interview progressed. The interview questions changed throughout the interview and basically were dependent on the participants' responses. In following an iterative design,

a typical question was an opened, explorative type. It produced a response that was theme based, thereby leading to a different theme-based question, which produced yet a different theme-based response. During the interviews, the questions asked were simple and short but allowed the participants to respond without time limitations to their responses. They were allowed to express themselves freely without feeling the need to adhere to answering only the questions asked. The structured questions were an open ended interview type relating to specific areas of experiences. In addition to the typical demographic questions such as the age of grandmother and grandchildren, the following questions were asked:

1. How do you feel about being a parent the second time around? About being placed in this position?
2. What are your experiences as the primary caregiver of your grandchild?
3. What are your feelings about the child's parents?
4. What are the differences in the behavior of your grandchild and the parents of the child?
5. How do your parenting skills in raising your grandchild compare with those that you used to raise the grandchild's parent?
6. How do you cope with the responsibilities of raising your grandchild?
7. Describe your ways of coping with issues involving you and/or the grandchild, such as gang and drug involvements; peer pressures, sexual activities.
8. What do you do in order to maintain a sense of balance? By this, I mean how do you handle your day-to-day responsibilities? What if something unexpectedly comes up?
9. What is your interpretation of the strong Black woman? Do you consider yourself to be a strong Black woman? What makes you believe that you are a strong Black woman?
10. If you consider yourself as being strong Black woman, how do you think this influences your life; your relationship with your grandchild?
11. How would you describe others' belief or disbelief in the idea of the strong Black woman?
12. Some Black women may argue that there is no such description as a strong Black woman. What do you think about this?
13. What type of support do you receive? Are family members involved? Do you have the involvement of extended family members, friends, church or other community resources?

Follow Up Interviews and Participant Checks

Each study participant received a copy of their signed consent form, their transcriptions, and a transcribed format of the narratives without the researcher's reflective notes. Each participant was asked to review her transcript and narrative. This was done to confirm or disavow that the data generated by each participant's input were each one's reality. Also, this was done to ensure that each one's reality represented what they believed to be true and valid representations of their experiences, beliefs, values, concerns, needs, and whatever else the data represented. Each participant was asked to comment on her responses and interpretations of the data. The participant was also given the opportunity to explain her responses and to add relevant information. I had asked each participant's permission to return if further questions arose or if clarification was needed later.

Two of the participants had used the "n" word during the interviews. I brought this to their attention and I thought that they might have wanted the word omitted. Neither wanted the word omitted. One stated that she had related to me exactly what she had heard and the way she had heard the use of the word. The other stated that the word was an indication of her thoughts and she saw no reason for the word to be removed. In trying to extract additional information relating to their coping mechanisms, most insisted that their method was utilizing prayer as an intercession to God and was their major means for coping. Two others remained steadfast to their previous responses relating to their coping mechanisms. Other things they did were not considered by them to be coping mechanisms, but were efforts that afforded them some relief they believed that they needed in their caregiving responsibilities.

Field Notes and Memos

My thoughts and interpretations were included in the field notes that became part of the data to be analyzed and reported. I composed field notes directly after each interview. My self reflective journal notes described my introspective and retrospective viewpoints and self criticisms and offered logical entries that facilitated the interpretations of data. I recorded various characteristics of the participants, the physical setting of the participants' homes, particular events and activities, and my own reactions to the events and activities. As Morrow, Smith, and Castañeda (2001) suggested, memos and field notes described how I handled the interviews. Field notes contained both the process and products of the interviews and of the analysis process that began at the beginning of each interview.

Data Reduction

Creswell (1998) informed the data reduction technique. The data was organized into separate files for each participant. Placed in the files were notes from the journal notes, notes from the transcriptions, field notes, and memos. All were read and re-read to determine what was relatable and what was not. Reading again was to determine what was significant to the study and what was not. Another reading of the data yielded organized reflective notes, descriptions, and interpretations. All data deemed insignificant were deleted.

Data Management

Following data reduction, I managed the data by organizing the same files used in data reduction. These files consisted of each participant's gathered significant

information. I made copies of journal entries' pages per each participant and placed them in each participant's file. I placed remaining field notes, memos, and transcribed data into each file. As I reviewed each file, checking and rechecking, I organized the data into labeled piles of information that were similar or had the same meanings. Data transcription included the questions along with the verbatim responses. I included notes on any nonverbal cues and gestures that accompanied the participants' words.

Using Microsoft Word, I organized the data into a flow of meaningful segments by cutting and pasting related sections together and converting all materials gathered for the study into a workable format with labels, as Creswell (1998) suggested. After each interview, when I was not listening to the audiotapes or reading the transcripts, notes, memos, journal notes, all materials related to the study were maintained in a locked file cabinet.

Analyzing the Data from Individual Interviews

When individuals construct stories about their lives, the narrative analysis function is to describe the meanings of their experiences. A narrative analysis seeks to describe the meaning of experiences of individuals who often are considered to be on the periphery of society (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). A narrative analysis assesses how statements are made orally. It also describes the participants' actions, emotional reactions, and expressions of feelings during the interview process. This validates how the narratives create meaning (Asante, 1990; Morrow & Smith, 2000).

Afrocentrically, the cosmological and ontological understandings significantly affect members of a cultural group. In analyzing narratives, the participants' realities

represent not only the results of the data taken from indepth interviews and observations, but also the dominant values, ideas, thoughts and behaviors (Kershaw, 1992).

I employed a narrative analysis process to analyze the data from the individual indepth interviews. In analyzing the data I used the field notes, memos, and audiotapes from the study participants' interviews and participants' checks. I also used my reflective journal notes that included a record of my thoughts and beliefs at each step of the study. Here, the analysis turned back on itself, evaluating the depth and scope of the data collected and the actual process of data collection and analysis. I saw this as analyzing the analysis. This means that I formed statements about the emerging findings while noting descriptions of the relationships among and between the parts of the data collection and the analysis.

Additionally, using techniques described by Polkinghorne (1995) for a narrative analysis, I examined the data to determine that I had included a description and history of the community where the participants live, the participants' feelings about their community, and a description of the participants' values, and what they value as part of their culture. I noted their physical descriptions, the way they dressed, and their affect during the interview to determine if I could discern their overall personalities. I examined how the participants' backgrounds and life histories led to the beliefs they have today. I examined my own values and beliefs and compared them to those of the participants.

Immersion in the data was done through repeated readings of the transcripts while listening to the recorded interviews, reading and rereading field notes, journal notes, memos and reflective notes. Making generalizations about the participants' feelings of

what they considered to be important aspects in their lives and generating preliminary summaries followed this. Assessments were done of my feelings and of their feelings about their obligations toward caretaking as well as their feelings about their strengths, resilience to negative forces in their lives, and about their perception of the SBW.

Introducing a Focus Group Initiative

The data from individual interviews and its early analysis conveyed what was needed for the focus group discussions and provided the basis for questions for group discussions. The purpose of focus group discussions was to validate what was found in the individual interviews, close the gaps in knowledge emanated during the individual interviews, and to initiate a womanist approach as it related to the study. The intent was to form an initiative effort to be used by the participants after the focus group discussions were completed. In circles of discussions, within a focus group setting, I believed the participants would have an opportunity to collectively explore their shared interests and beliefs.

During the participant check process, I had asked all participants if they were still interested in participating in the focus group discussions. All indicated that they were interested but their participation was dependent on the day and time of the meetings. Two of the participants stated they were willing to participate but did not believe focus group discussions would be beneficial to them.

After many telephone calls and repeated calls to the participants, the majority agreed that Saturday afternoons would be the best time to meet although one participant, a Seventh Day Adventist, stated she could not participate on a Saturday as it is her Sabbath. None of the participants committed entirely to an alternative day or time so it

was agreed to establish Saturday afternoons at 3:00 P. M. as the day and time for focus group meetings.

Researcher as an Instrument in a Focus Group Setting

In an afrocentric inquiry, primarily where human behavior is a factor, Reviere (2001) asserted that data collected and analyzed within a group setting must be judged against five afrocentric canons or rules of: (a) truth, (b) commitment, (c) justice, (d) community, and (e) harmony. According to Reviere, truth represents the verification of knowledge claims. From an afrocentric research perspective, it is grounded in the human experiences of a cultural group and it must be rooted in the collective experiences of the participants, including the researcher. Reviere further alluded that the collective experiences of the group are considered to be the ultimate authority in the determination of what they consider to be true. In seeking truth that represented the collective experiences, the focus group study procedures were directed in a fair minded manner toward all study participants. As a community of grandmothers raising their grandchildren, and having similar experiences, all of the participants could relate to the questions posed or could answer in a way that each one understood the other's responses. They revealed their experiences that may not have been exact but were similar enough to generate responses that they all understood.

The second rule, commitment, according to Reviere (2001), specifically applies to the researcher and disregards the assumption that commitment to the objectives and outcomes of the research activity will be avoided. It was imperative that I, as researcher, emphasize careful consideration of how knowledge was constructed and used. Therefore, I had to maintain the same commitment to the group members, as I did during individual

interviews. I did not take an objective, value free view during the discussions. Reviere asserted that a burden is placed on the researcher to work continuously by self reflecting, and self criticizing, throughout the focus group process. To do this, I kept reflective journal notes during this process noting my biases and other judgmental baggage that I brought to the sessions. I also noted my feelings, unstated responses, and unstated comments during the group sessions.

The third rule is justice. This required that I avoid creating, exaggerating, or causing divisions or disruptions between the group members. The effort was to create and maintain a harmonious relationship within the group (Reviere, 2001). I had to recognize that diversity among the participants had to be considered and I sought to ensure that each voice or perspective of each group member was heard and if each wanted to be heard. All were given a chance to participate without any one person attempting to dominate the discussions.

Community, the fourth rule, means recognizing and maintaining that the group is a community of stakeholders, the grandmothers. Central to this research was the recognition of the importance of the participants' roles and the effects of their roles within their AACG community. That is, the community consisting of themselves. This further enhanced the researcher and participant collaborative efforts rather than an exacerbation of conflicts, which would be inherent when separating the two (Reviere, 2001).

The fifth and final rule in the afrocentric research process in a group setting, according to Reviere, is harmony. This is closely related to the rule of community concept. I had to encourage and maintain a harmonious relationship between group

members and I was mindful of the welfare of the participants. This rule also represented an important test of validity to afrocentric research according to Asante (1998) and Reviere (2001).

Interviewing the Group Members

A Consent for a Group Interview form was explained and presented to each participant. All participating group members read and signed the consent form. I asked permission to audiotape and to take notes during the discussions. The participants present gave permission, including the participant who had not wanted her individual interviews audio taped during the individual interview process. Confidentiality was explained to the participants. They were advised that the researcher would maintain confidentiality. I explained that confidentiality and anonymity could not be guaranteed away from the group discussions. They were encouraged to maintain confidentiality and anonymity after leaving the group discussions.

I tried to create a supportive environment for the participants as suggested by Marshall and Rossman (1999). I did this by asking relative questions in order to encourage discussions. Milam (1992) asserted that group discussions reflect the collective approach that is normal for an afrocentric research process. Conversational style, indepth discussions were considered the interviewing techniques used for the group participants. I directed the inquiry in an unstructured fashion as suggested by Fontana and Frey (2000).

Analyzing Focus Group Data

Analysis began at the first group discussion stage and continued throughout. As with analyzing the narrative data from indepth individual interviews, the collected data

generated by the focus group discussions were transcribed from the audiotapes. I compiled notes on my observations, watched and manually recorded the body language used, and other responses made by the participants. I made notes about the participants' intensity of comments and responses. My impressions, feelings, thoughts, my introspective and retrospective techniques were part of the focus group data collection and analysis.

In setting up the data for analyzing, upon reading and rereading the transcripts, themes and subthemes emerged from the participants' responses. Responses were placed into categories and were designated concepts or themes. Number codes were assigned to each concept and theme with the same or similar meaning. The concept or theme with the highest count of responses was considered a major theme. All others were subthemes. As with the data from the individual interviews, the focus group data were reduced, maintained, and analyzed.

Analytical Induction

The analytical process involved identifying leading, greatly entrenched, or informed categories of meanings which emerged from the data, and which were held by the study participants (Patton, 1990). Participant observations and immersion of the data directed me to what was common in the participants' descriptions of their lives and the people, challenges, and events in their lives. This led to the general and shared connections they made between what was ongoing in their lives, the quality of their lives, and the quality of their hopes. In order to accomplish this, I systematically examined the data for similarities in concepts. I compared occurrences where the concepts appeared to be in the same general category with each other.

During the group discussions, I focused on those aspects of the participants' responses that were essential to and were the necessary components needed, to identify and describe the participants well enough in order to be able to declare who they were as group members. That was, how they lived, their issues and problems as SBWs, and their operant cosmology and epistemology. More importantly, an analytical induction provided insights into what worked for them in successfully meeting the challenges before them as AACGs.

Trustworthiness—Threats to Validity

Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (2000) maintain that in qualitative research, there has been both apprehension in acknowledging, and perhaps complete denial of the validity concept. They asserted that the issue of validity of any study must be dealt with. Accordingly, they discussed three prominent threats to validity in qualitative research: (a) concepts; (b) personal biases; and (3) participants' reactions.

Concepts

What will ensure accurate and complete descriptions of concepts that the study participants will provide? Following the directions of Banks (1992) and Reviere (2001), during the group discussions, I made sure that the responses to the inquiries were not represented wholly by the position of any single group participant. The subject of inquiry concepts were defined or agreed upon by each participant in the individual interview settings, and again in a collective setting, as a group of the same participants.

The results would have also ensured the completion of descriptions and accuracy of concepts if I had needed to allow others outside of the study context to provide

perceptions and insights of concepts. Although this was not needed, I did ask three AACGs who I personally knew, who did not live on the Westside, and who were of a different socioeconomic status than the study participants, about certain subjects of inquiry that had been posed to the study participants. They were asked to provide their perceptions and insights of the meanings of certain concepts. For instance, those AACGs, outside of the realm of the study, two African Americans and one White, had the same fears about gang involvement, sexual activities, and other concerns about their grandchildren as the study participants. They worried just as much about certain things as the study participants. Having enough finances was a problem for them as well; the same as it was for the study participants. Both African American grandmothers considered themselves as being SBWs. The White custodial grandmother considered herself to be strong though she stated that she had plenty of support through her friends, fellow church members, and a significant other.

Personal Biases

As the researcher, I should be able to determine whether or not my personal biases were a threat to validity. If they were not, then I should be able to provide the reason why they were not. If I perceived my personal biases to be a threat, I should be able to explain what I intended to do about them. My reflexive journal entries with introspective and retrospective data, field notes, and research memos became a part of the data collection. They indicated whether or not my personal biases existed, if they were a threat, and explained whether or not I had personal biases that may have affected the study. The results of self reflection and self criticism throughout the study ensured that I paid close attention to my personal biases and how they could have threatened the study.

Participants' Reactions

The third possible threat to validity was, as Locke and others suggested, such that I had to consider in what ways and to what degree did the participants' reactions to me and to the methodology that I used, hinder obtaining valid data. I had to consider and presume that being an African American woman, and being one who was raised as an African American, I would have entry into the participants' world. I presumed that I possibly had access to many of their collective patterns of behavior, speech, and with some of their ways of thinking. This strengthened the efforts of acquiring credible information. Effectively using what Reviere (2001) explained as the five canons or rules of data collection and analysis within a group context, and the focus group data, also represented tests of validity.

I used the qualitative term for validity, which is credibility (Siegle, 2003). In order to minimize threats of validity to establish credibility, I chose those prospective participants who had never met me. Doing this increased the trustworthiness of the study as it decreased my own biases and decreased the likelihood of the study participants to sway their responses to what they would believed or thought what I, as the researcher, would have expected them to say.

Triangulation of Data

For triangulation of data, I used introspective and retrospective notes, journal notes, field notes, focus group data, and historical data. Speaking informally with other AACGs outside of the realm of study, over lunch or during an informal telephone conversation, not only offered credibility to the study but also served as a method of data triangulation. I also spoke with an elderly relative who is the mother of 18 children and the grandmother of over 60 grandchildren. She has outlived many of her children and

some of her grandchildren. She has raised many of the grandchildren alone, without either of the children's parents in the home. She lives in the rural south, and except for gang affiliation that was not a prevailing factor in her community when she was raising her grandchildren, her concerns paralleled those of the study participants. Inquiring of others outside of the study context provided perceptions and insights of the study concepts. The results ensured the researcher's completion of descriptions and accuracy of the concepts.

Applying Retrospective Techniques

Retrospection, according to Asante (1990) and Reviere (2001), is mainly concerned with how data are interpreted. It is intended to assist the researcher in ascertaining what personal obstacles existed that might have impeded a fair interpretation of the data. After the completion of the inquiries, I questioned myself about any personal barriers that may have influenced data interpretation. Retrospectively, I examined the data and made notes pertaining to if and how my life experiences could have obstructed or supported a fair interpretation of the data. I determined my beliefs about the study participants at the end of the inquiry and whether or not my beliefs prior to the inquiry were changed in any way during the inquiry process. As with introspection, the retrospection process provided a triangulation of data that is important in afrocentric research (Reviere, 2000)

Summary

I used a mixed methodological approach in collecting narratives, facilitating focus group discussions, and in employing techniques using narrative analysis and analytical

induction. Engaging an afrocentric methodology provided a perspective that formed a cultural basis and a lens through which I gained an understanding of the real life experiences of AACGs who participated in the study.

The major approach to collecting and gathering data in an afrocentric methodology revolved around encouraging the participants to tell their individual and collective stories by way of individual interviews and focus group discussions. The narratives stories were condensed into individual stories that represented “their stories.” This included the common threads, common notions, points of view, shared world views, attitudes, beliefs, and their shared ways of seeing things.

Scant information from the individual interviews relating to coping mechanisms and the SBW and womanist concepts were fed back into group discussions towards a story that should be useful in changing the participants’ lot in life as AACGs. The afrocentric and qualitative approach revealed the histories and events that have happened and are currently happening to them. This approach revealed the problems they faced, and made it easier to identify solutions that are available or that can be made available. This was based on their experiences and deliberations as they expressed their feelings about the challenges that inform the management of their similar and shared problems.

With the small sample used in studying the AACGs, I was able to fully interact with all of them individually, and collectively as a group. I was able to capture and refine concepts and ideas taken from their accounts of their coping mechanisms, and accounts of how and why things are the way they are with them.

Overall, each cycle of data gathering and reviewing, immersing myself in the data, understanding what I had learned, rechecking and reaffirming, provided better

insight into what I was studying. Moreover, using this type of methodology allowed me to make what is known about phenomena of the SBW and the womanist concepts, as they related to the AACGs. Engaging an afrocentric methodology provided a perspective that formed a cultural basis and a lens through which I gained an understanding of the real life experiences of the AACGs who participated in the study.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF DATA—INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Meeting Grandma

According to Asante (1990), afrocentric research calls for data to be presented in a descriptive mode, using an interactive model which uncovers strengths that are located in a supportive and integrative function of human experiences that are understandable and clear. Besides the inclusion of triangulation of information and the indepth interviews data, an interactive model includes presenting indepth knowledge in a social and human context from the perceptions of both the study participants and the researcher.

This chapter includes the participants' unfolding stories that describe their life's experiences. Their experiences were captured in their own context. They were allowed to give voice, to express their beliefs, values, experiences, givens, hopes, and dreams. The individual interviews gave the participants an opportunity to express themselves in the manner they desired. From the structured, open-ended interview type questions, interested responses emerged. These stories helped to clarify the much broader research questions.

The testimony section described the events that occurred between the individual interviews and the focus group discussions and helped explain occurrences that formed a profound relationship between some of the participants and the researcher.

Traveling with the Researcher: An Explanation for Researcher's Reflections

As with the study participants, in afrocentric research, the researcher is located at the centered place in the study. According to Dickerson (1995), afrocentric collected data must come from the participants' perspective. Being a centered participant, my own ideals, values, beliefs, and experiences, which were data, were placed at the center of inquiry. And, as the researcher, my own expressions or reflections follow each individual interview or group discussion.

According to Reviere (2001), "the inclusion of the personal is therefore necessary for afrocentric research" (p.714) and provides actual data for the inquiry. Following Collins' (1990) pathway of direction, as a study participant, I was entrenched in the study, and including my personal reflections in the report was an alternative technique to invoke and articulate my ideas, thoughts and experiences at the center of inquiry. This approach enables readers to assess the researcher's feelings. That is, to see and hear the essence or "soul" of the dialogues as the stories and discussions unfold. Because this study relied on the afrocentric perspective, this researcher was very involved with the participants and our discussion. I was not a detached observer and it was befitting that researcher reflections be included in the product of the study. There was significance to this researcher's feelings and personal reactions and they should be revealed (Key, 1997). This exposed my connectedness to the participants, and this connectedness has afrocentric roots (Collins, 1990).

Who They Are

Table 1 provides demographics and key characteristics about the participants and the grandchildren they are raising.

Table 1: Profile Summary of Study Participants and Grandchildren

# and Name of Participant	Age	Number of Children In Care	Age of Child(ren)	Caregiver Since Child(ren) Was/Were	Participant's Source of Income	Relationship Bio Parent to Participant	Reason for Caregiving-Status of Bio Parent
1 Anna	48	1 f	15	10	PA, Employment	Daughter	Voluntary Surrender
2 Mary	72	1 f	10	Infant	SS, Pension	Niece	Incarcerated
3 Alice	65	2 f	17, 15	5, 3	PA	Daughter	Death
4 Sarah	63	2 m	17, 15	16, 4	SS, Employment	Daughter	Death
5 Martha	67	2 f 1 m	15, 6 4	12, Infant Infant	SS, Pension	Daughter and Son	Death Drug Addict
6 Catherine	54	1 m	10	Newborn	SSD	Son	Incarcerated
7 Marie	56	1 f 2 m	17 14, 12	8 5, 3	SA, PA, and Employment	Daughter	Drug Addict
8 Daisy	70	1 f	22 mths	Newborn	SS, Other	Son	Abandonment
9 Pat	52	2 m 2 f	14, 13 5, 4	11, 10 2, 1	PA, Pension	Daughter	Death
10 Selma	68	1 f 1 m	16 14	Infant Infant	SS	Daughter	Abandonment

Pseudonyms are used to protect each participant's anonymity.

Daisy's adult granddaughter died during the study, leaving a 14-year-old son. Daisy is not also raising her great grandson.

PA is Public Assistance.

SS is Social Security benefits.

SSD is Social Security Disability benefits.

Hear Their Voices

Anna

This participant contacted the researcher by telephone after she read a flyer posted on her church's bulletin board. She spoke with an accent that caused me to question her ethnicity. Because of her accent, it was assumed that she was a Latina. She insisted that she was indeed an African American. The question of whether she was or was not an African American was not further explored. She agreed to be interviewed at the West Las Vegas Arts and Cultural Center (WLVACC).

Anna was a very pleasant, cheerful person who came from Belize and has lived in this country for over 30 years. She informed me that Belize is a South American country located "on the other side of Mexico." She and her seven siblings grew up in an impoverished area of Belize and were raised by a single mother.

The participant was encouraged by her mother to work hard and to depend only on herself for survival. Anna learned how to improvise at a very young age and, if she had to, to do without those things that she needed or desired. Her mother also taught her to always consider her family as one of the most important elements of her life. Anna learned to accept her plight in life, but at the same time, to try diligently to make things better for herself and her children. To never give up hope and to always keep God first in her life were other lessons that she learned. Anna stated she believed that although she sometimes strayed away from her mother's teachings, she was always able to resume and adhere to the lessons she had learned.

Anna was invited to come and live in the United States by an older sister who had previously migrated to California. She has lived in Las Vegas for the past 10 years.

Since moving to Las Vegas, Anna has had problems obtaining affordable housing in a safe area. She lives in a dangerous public housing project and is very fearful. So far, she has been able to prevent her sons that live at home, and the granddaughter she is raising, from being influenced by participation in gang related activities. She taught them to try to avoid drive by shootings. She insists they maintain good grades, finish school, and advance to a life of good, productive citizenry, independence, and self sufficiency. She stated that the children appear to understand her status in life and that she is doing the very best she can.

Anna is the mother of six children; four are adults and live on their own. Two sons, ages 12 and 16, live at home. She is also raising her 15-year-old granddaughter. The granddaughter is the child of one of her adult daughters who lives out of state. The grandchild's biological mother was 14½ years old when she gave birth to the child. Anna has had custody of this granddaughter since the child was 10 years old. She decided to take the child after listening to her granddaughter's many complaints that she believed that her biological mother did not love or care for her. Anna learned from the child's mother that she just could not bond with this child although she had other children after this child's birth and that the mother did treat the other children differently. The mother could not explain or give reasons for her feelings. The mother gave permission for Anna to take custody of the child and bring her to Las Vegas to live with her. The participant stated that this was something that she felt compelled to do. She stated adamantly that she is saving this child's life and is offering her a better opportunity at life.

The grandchild's mother did not offer to help support the child and Anna stated that her daughter is unable to do so. This grandmother believed she is doing the mother a

huge favor by relieving her of the responsibility of caring for the child. According to Anna, it was easy for her to assume the mother role for the granddaughter, as it is an extension to raising her teenage boys still residing with her. There is not a gap in role change where she had to become a full time mother the second around at a different time in her life.

None of the fathers are involved in their children's lives nor does the participant receive support from the fathers. She is not aware of the identity of her grandchild's father and the child's mother has refused to give her any information concerning him.

Anna works as a lunchroom attendant at one of the community's elementary schools and stated that she loves her job and is grateful that she is able to work. She only works nine months of the school year. This is a school that is on the 12-month cycle and is opened for classes during the entire year. She is unable to secure full time employment as she does not have the necessary seniority. Anna does not receive unemployment compensation during the time she is off from work. During the summer months, she has relied on public assistance for income and medical coverage. She stated she has been unable to obtain other assistance such as rental and utility assistance from community agencies that provide these services. She has been told by some agencies that even though she is unemployed at the time of application, she still has a job to return to. This has caused her much frustration and stress because she has visited these agencies each summer and has been told each time that they cannot help her. She has refused to give up. Sometimes, she has been able to receive assistance from her church, but she uses this only as a last resort.

Anna suffers from diabetes and hypertension and takes prescribed medications. Although having the diseases has caused her concern, this concern is not a priority for her. She stated that she would never be deterred or hampered from doing what she believed she must do in order to raise the children properly and in the best manner that she can.

Anna expressed amazement that she has been able to manage. She has relied on her trust and faith in God to cope and persevere. She described herself as being a powerful believer in prayer, especially in difficult times. She is Catholic and, without fail, she attends Mass each Sunday.

She has no family members in Las Vegas who are able to provide support. When asked how she happened to be living in Las Vegas rather than in California where she has siblings, she avoided answering directly but implied she came with the father of her youngest child who left her soon after they arrived in Las Vegas.

Although not often, when she has extra money, socially Anna enjoys playing bingo with close friends. Sometimes the friends sponsor her on bingo outings so she can have some diversion in her life. She admitted she enjoys having a cocktail or two at these rare events. She denied having a deep interest in male companionship but stated that she did have a male friend that she sees occasionally.

Anna often discusses what she referred to as life's facts with her grandchild and tries to strongly impress upon her that she is expected to be successful in her life. Even in the circumstances that they live, this grandmother does not believe she has any problems with raising her own children or her grandchild.

Anna perceives herself as being a SBW because of her many struggles. She copes not so much as relying on others, but by using her own techniques which she described as relying on her spirituality and faith, and by maintaining a positive attitude. Whenever she has had a financial dilemma or when some other difficult situation arose, she believed a resolution would occur without her having to be troubled about it. Her beliefs are positive and she stated that there is no room for doubts or worry. Believing that she is a SBW has enabled her to endure. She has had financial and other difficulties all of her life so to struggle is not unusual for her, nor does it frighten her. When she has been unable to secure needed assistance, she has believed a solution would eventually become apparent. She says she has refused to dwell on things that others may consider to be difficult. She firmly believes that there is not a problem that cannot be solved. According to Anna, as long as she believes a problem can be solved, it will be solved, and in her case, it usually is.

The womanist definition as it applied to this study was explained to Anna and she was interested in attending the focus group sessions to see if she would be interested in becoming involved with other AACGs for engaging in mutual support.

Researcher's Reflective Expressions—Anna

This participant appeared to appreciate the similarities in our lives when I expressed that I had been a single parent at one time and had to struggle at times. She immediately relaxed. At the participant's suggestion, the interview was done in two 1½ hour sessions. Anna was very neatly dressed and well groomed. I deliberately did not wear jewelry and dressed casually for the interviews as I did not want to appear flamboyant. Anna wore lovely jewelry and quite a bit of it. She has two gold front teeth

and I wondered how could she afford such? I surmised that it was not my concern. I did not want to have malicious or suspicious thoughts. Anna also has a car and stated that so far she has been able to afford its upkeep. My mind questioning reminded me of the time when I was an entry level social worker taking applications from women who were applying for welfare and I was required to question applicants about their possessions.

I wanted to ask Anna about her 14½ year old daughter who had a baby and left home at such a young age. In my judgmental mind, how could she have allowed that to happen? What was she doing or thinking at that time? Then how could she have allowed this daughter to later “skip” her parental responsibility to her child? Was this an intention to make up for allowing her daughter to be placed in such a position at such a young age? These questions, along with others, crossed my mind during the interviews but I dared not ask the questions for fear of offending her. I needed her to participate in the study. She did not need me.

The participant has another adult daughter who does not live at home. She lives in her own apartment and works at a fairly decent paying job. At times, she would tell her mother that she did not have enough money to fully pay her rent and the participant would subsidize her daughter’s rent payment. I wondered how she could do that when she could not afford a safe place of her own to live. Again, she has allowed an adult child to fail to accept responsibility. I did have the courage to ask her if this daughter ever considered taking a part time second job to meet her expenses and Anna replied that she felt obligated to help all of her children in any way that she could. When I asked how she could help her daughter when she was out of work during the summer months, Anna

stated that she prays passionately and somehow she is always able to contribute. I imagined that if I were in her position, I would probably do the same thing.

During the interview Anna stated that she and I probably had ancestors who were natives of Africa and that hers were brought to Belize and mine to the United States as slaves. She commented that her female slave ancestors remained free of “infiltration” by the White male slave owners. She based this on the complexion of her skin, which was very dark. She stated that because of the color of my skin, which she described as being “paper sack tan,” my female slave ancestors did not escape the “infiltration.” Therefore, she must be 100% African, whereas I was not. I wondered if she subconsciously alluded to the color code that, for generations, has plagued many African Americans and probably those in the Diaspora. This means that there has been, and probably still is, bias within the ethnic group. The color spectrum revolves from the very fair skinned persons who are believed to have the most advantages to the very dark skinned persons who would have the least advantages.

This led to the discussion of the differences she perceived between who she referred to as “native” African Americans, and those born and raised in the Diaspora. As an example, she stated that she was raised to respect any elderly person, meaning those who were old enough to be her parent. She was also taught to obey authority. She did not see these qualities in “native” African Americans. She described “native” African Americans as being quick tempered, often not using common sense, being disrespectful to others, and quick to react without thinking. I took offense at these assumptions and to what Anna described as “the natives,” who generally do not think things through. “They just react, without thinking,” she said. Anna said she was taught to think and develop a

plan prior to taking action. I felt an urgent need to defend “native” African Americans and I did so by explaining to her that I and many others were taught as she was. Just like any group of ethnic people, all are not the same, nor do they act in the same manner.

I appreciated her meeting with me and participating in this process and I told her this. I advised her to keep my telephone number and to not hesitate to contact me if she felt that I could help her or refer her to resources where she might receive assistance. I suggested that she might want to consider making application to Habitat for Humanity in order to obtain affordable, permanent housing.

I considered Anna to be a good mother and custodial grandparent. In my opinion, she failed to allow some of her adult children to handle their own responsibilities and has encouraged them to lean on her when in actuality she might have been unable to help them. Perhaps this was what she considered being a good parent. It was not for me to judge her.

Mary

The second participant was referred for the study by the principal of the school where her great grandniece attended. She is the custodial parent of a 10-year-old girl. She and the child live in a modest rental home. She receives Social Security benefits and a small pension from her days of employment. A very soft spoken person, the participant is a former seamstress and still does light alterations, mostly for the teachers at the child’s school. She is 72 years old and was the oldest person interviewed.

Mary relocated to Las Vegas from Michigan in order to live near her daughter. She had two adult children. Her son died after overdosing on drugs. Her daughter maintains close contact with Mary and offers support to her mother when she can. The

participant stated that her daughter's husband dislikes her and she believed that because of this dislike, her daughter is limited to the amount of time she can spend with her mother. The child she is raising is the child of her brother's great grandchild. This brother has a daughter who is the child's grandmother. The grandmother has a daughter who is the child's natural mother. Therefore, the participant is the child's great grandaunt. The child's mother was incarcerated in another state and gave birth to the child while in prison. Before the child was born, the mother requested Mary to take the child and raise her until the mother's release from prison and the participant agreed. The mother has never been out of prison for more than six months at a time before becoming incarcerated again, mostly on drug related charges. She has not seen the child since the child was six months old. She has Mary's telephone number and address but she never calls or writes. She does not keep in contact with her own mother or other family members.

Mary expressed pride that the child is an "A" student, but often there are discipline problems at school. She described the child as a follower and believes that others easily influence the child. She is considering taking the child and moving back to the farm that her family still owns in Alabama. She believes that Las Vegas is not a place to raise children. Anna is afraid of gang related influences and believes that as she becomes older, the child will not obey her.

She commented on the child's interest in boys and believes that at age 10, the child is much too young to have such an interest. This bothers her. She often advises the child on the subject of making and keeping friends, and to use caution when selecting her friends. She remembered the lessons she learned from her grandmother, while growing

up, about forming relationships with her peers. She was told that her choices in friends were not appropriate. She laughed at how her grandmother observed a boy showing her a condom when she was about 14 years old. Her grandmother told her that she was not to have anything to do with him and to not even speak to him. In later years, the participant married him. After having two children, the marriage ended.

Mary said that at her age, patience is what is needed to raise the child. She stated that she seldom feels overwhelmed. She is the oldest of 13 children and was raised on a farm in rural Alabama. Her mother was a very fragile, sickly person. Because of this, a lot of child raising responsibilities were placed upon the participant when she was very young. She reflected on how, beginning at age 10, she had to be midwife to her mother who gave birth every two years. She perceived herself as not ever having a childhood because being the oldest, she had to raise her younger siblings and take over household chores because her mother was often ill. She stated that all she has ever known is patience and caring for children. She also remembered growing up on a farm and how everyone in her small farming community had a hand in raising all of the community's children.

Mary believes if a woman is self supporting, that makes her a strong woman. She has always supported herself and her children so she considers herself to be a SBW. She believes that any woman has to be strong in order to live with a man. She felt that African American men have always left major decisions regarding family responsibilities to the women of the family and those African American women have taken on the role without protest. She surmised that for years, many African American men have projected their inability to assume responsibilities of caring for anyone other than themselves, and

African American women have been enablers by allowing them to do this. She alluded that she did not believe that being a SBW causes stress or other health problems. She also believed that African American women are the strongest of all women because they have had to struggle in order to survive with or without a spouse, and have always had to work in and out of the home. She reminisced about enduring racial remarks and unfair treatment during her years of employment. Being a single parent, she would come home after a day of racist ridicule at work to care for her children. In the evenings, not having any one to talk to, she said all she could do was constantly think about getting up in the mornings and having to endure the same thing at work the next day. This continued for years but she believed that she did not have any other choice but to remain at her job, as she needed it to support herself and her children.

Mary stated she feels fortunate to again have the opportunity to raise a child. To her, it is her duty to take care of the child she is raising since the child is “family.” She enjoys taking care of children, and as she related, she has had a lot of practice. She gathers strength in her day-to-day activities by praying and trusting in God. At the end of the interview, Mary agreed to participate in a focus group to discuss becoming a member of a supportive group of women who lived in a similar situation.

Researcher’s Reflective Expressions—Mary

This interview took less time than any of the interviews, lasting approximately an hour. Throughout the interview, the participant would begin to answer the question asked and to discuss her feelings and thoughts. Suddenly, in a rambling manner, she would begin to talk about situations totally unrelated to herself or to the questions asked. For instance, in a question relating to her belief about being a SBW, she began to state

the reason why she believed she was one, then suddenly began to talk about her brother-in-law who told her how her sister could not cook corn. Again, when she made the statement about how her grandmother told her a lot about slavery, she spoke on the subject for a while, and then abruptly began to talk about her baby brother crying and how she had to run to comfort him when her mother was ill and could not do it.

I suspected this participant could be experiencing the beginning of some form of dementia. Quite a few times, I had to allow her to finish what she was saying in order to show her courtesy. Then I would start over again and attempt to redirect her to what she was originally discussing. What I gathered from this interview was that Mary had low opinions about African American men. When I asked her if her ex-husband was the cause of her feelings, she did not reply to the question. Instead, she began to speak on a different subject totally unrelated to herself or to the question that had been asked.

This interview was very exhausting for me, and it may have been exhausting for her as well. The questions asked probably enabled her to reminisce a lot about the past, but the past that she discussed was not always related to her or her circumstances.

Alice

The director of the WLVACC referred Alice. After telephoning the participant, she agreed to meet with me at the WLVACC for an interview. She was a very attractive woman at age 65, appearing much younger than her stated age. After reading the informed consent for an individual interview, Alice stated that she did not want the interview audio taped. Her reason was that some day she would like to write a book about her life and did not want her words on tape. I explained to her that the tapes would be destroyed or she could keep them if she'd like after they had been transcribed. She

insisted that she would not be audio taped. This interview took about a month to complete, as the interview process was hand written. After the initial interview, Alice allowed the researcher to come to her home for the subsequent interviews.

The family resided in a very neat, two-bedroom home. Alice described herself as a “groupie” of the 60s, a devotee of the rock, the live-and-love-free, and the make-love-not-war culture. Essentially those involved in the music scene of that era supported her financially. She stated that she was quite promiscuous back then, but bragged that she has been celibate for over 30 years. She alluded to being involved with a famous rock guitarist and having his daughter who never knew her father.

In later years, this daughter was killed in a car accident. The daughter was the mother of two girls. The participant did not personally know the girls’ putative father. He was never involved in their lives and was killed during the riot emanating from the Rodney King incident. Alice has custody of her daughter’s two children and is now raising them. The two girls are now 15 and 17.

This participant was the only interviewee who totally depends on public assistance and the services of various community agencies for support. She was very knowledgeable and resourceful concerning resources and she takes full advantage of the available services. She stated that she probably should feel guilty for “taking from the system,” but does not as not only does she need the services, but her own mother worked for years and died at the age of 62 without reaping any of the benefits that would have become available to her. Alice declared that she is only taking those benefits that her mother did not have a chance to receive. She receives Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI) benefits based on her age and her disability that she did not identify. She had not

worked enough to earn credits for Social Security Disability (SSD) benefits or regular Social Security Retirement benefits.

Alice described herself as hailing from a long line of “loose women.” She reminisced about the women in her family who used their light skin tones and long beautiful hair to manipulate others, especially men, in a manner to get anything they wanted. Alice was born in a small, rural, southern town in Georgia. She lived in a community called “Dirty Spoon” which was located across the tracks from more affluent neighborhoods. The participant and I both laughed at the name. Alice was born when her mother was 17 years old. When Alice was 10 months old, her mother migrated north to New York, leaving the infant to be raised by her grandmother

Her grandmother taught Alice that education was fine for some people but using one’s wits to survive was more important and advantageous. This meant that she should learn to think and use her mind to accomplish whatever she wanted for her life. With this in mind, Alice stated that she is home schooling her granddaughters academically. As her grandmother did for her, Alice is teaching the girls how to use common sense, and how to apply the wisdom being passed on to them.

After completing the 10th grade, Alice left Georgia to live with her mother and never returned to school. She said her mother did not want to be identified as her mother. Along with placing her own age as being 10 years younger, her mother would introduce Alice to others as her younger sister. As such, the participant stated that she played the role of a younger sister rather than as a daughter. That meant to her that she did not have to obey her mother and she could do as she pleased without any parental guidance or direction.

Alice met a famous rock 'n roll singer who took an interest in her. The participant left her mother's care and traveled with the singer. Through this relationship, she met other musicians and moved on to other relationships that she described as the "flavor of the minute." She stated that this meant she was a regular part of the "groupie" scene and that for years she attached herself to people in the entertainment industry, especially men. Alice maintained she has had a very interesting and exciting life. She said her many friends in the entertainment business supported her and she never worked until after her children were born. She related that her friends always looked out for her. Alice had three children and said she was once married for 3 days to a man 15 years her junior.

Alice said that because of the life she lived and with the lessons learned from her grandmother, she was able to escape what she described as "the world's unpleasanties." She never had to struggle as it is defined. She considers her life as being much different than the "ordinary Black woman." Alice is unable to identify with being aa SBW. According to her, there were always vast and gainful opportunities for her, had she wanted them. She believes that any female can be strong if she has had to struggle or face adversities in order to survive. However, she also stated she was never a witness to any of life's turmoil as it could have applied to her. She said she is unable to relate to a typical AACG living on the Westside, and that she probably has nothing in common with the grandmothers other than they all live in the same community. She spoke of a couple of her friends who were single grandmothers who do not live on the Westside and who work at local strip bars. As she related, these friends work as dancers, not "house

moms.” She described herself as not being a typical grandmother, in appearance or in action.

Alice says she is grateful she has the opportunity to be a parent the second time around. She attested to fine tuning her natural parenting skills on her own children by utilizing her grandmother’s most realistic beliefs and ideals and burying the antiquated ones such as “marrying up,” meaning females marrying a fair skinned man with money. Alice is a mulatto, which is described as an individual of Black and White ancestry (Webster’s II New College Dictionary, 1995) where Caucasian features are more dominant. In present society, people of both mixed Black and White ethnicity are referred to as being biracial or racially mixed persons.

According to this participant, this second chance at raising children has found her to be better prepared to raise a family. Since the participant has been raising her two grandchildren, she believes that she has taken a more serious and meaningful impression at life. She stated that there are no problems with them so far and feels with the type of life she has lived in the past, there is not anything that they can do that will surpass her exploits or her radical moves and views. She realizes that she and her grandchildren live in a very vulnerable and troublesome place and time period. In her mind set, Alice believes that with her guidance, her grandchildren either know or are learning how to make good decisions and how to display appropriate behavior according to society’s standards.

The participant said she is not particularly religious or spiritual and that she copes by doing what she has always done. She uses her wits and common sense rather than leaning on a higher power for direction and guidance for her life and the lives of the

children. In raising her granddaughters, she uses what she described as patience, tempered by firmness, commitment, dependability, consistency, love, and a steadfast sense of purpose. She believes these things should be sufficient in raising children or grandchildren. She receives support from her many friends who are still a part of the entertainment industry.

When discussing her participation in a focus group in order to meet with other AACGs to discuss how they could form a womanist group, Alice stated she did not believe she would be instrumental in convincing herself or others. She was not sure that she could become a womanist for the same reasons she does not consider herself to be a SBW.

Researcher's Reflective Expressions—Alice

At first sight, this participant appeared to be arrogant, pretentious and apprehensive. She was dressed all in black. She had long, reddish-blond braided hair extensions and her head was topped by a black crinkled top hat. This was amusing and comical to me. She relaxed more when I told her that I was also born in Georgia as she had been and that I still had lots of family members who still live there. We jovially discussed the way things were in Georgia years ago. We reminisced about the different southern terms and metaphors that we both knew.

When Alice stated that she did not feel comfortable having the interview audio taped, I became frustrated and inwardly disturbed but I soon banished those feelings. The subsequent interview visits were quite lengthy because I had to make handwritten notes, talk, and listen all at the same time. Alice enjoyed talking about herself and I enjoyed listening to her colorful stories. Mentally, I questioned whether I could believe all that

she was telling me regarding her past associations with famous entertainers she named and said had supported her before she decided to settle down. Some of my doubts were relieved during one interview session when Alice answered her telephone using the speaker button mode. I could not help but hear the conversation. On the other end was a woman who identified herself with a first name I recognized as that of a famous entertainer. The caller wanted to know why Alice had not called to wish her a happy birthday. The conversation ended with the entertainer telling Alice that she had to get ready to do her show.

I was skeptical about the children being involved in a home study program. I did not want to ask outright how many hours and days did the participant and the children perform the tasks. When the participant stated that she home schooled the children, she looked at my face and I felt she could see my doubts. I mentioned to her that it is unfortunate that the school district does not employ truant officers nor does it check on students who do not attend school. The participant did not comment but her expression implied she could not care less whether or not I believed her.

Alice was the only participant who did not state she copes by relying on God and fervently listening to receive help from Him. I found the participant to be a very interesting and colorful person. After completing the interviewing process, I felt differently about the participant than I did when we first met. Although Alice stated she dropped out of high school in the 10th grade, her diction was excellent and she spoke as though she had acquired a higher education.

Sarah

When Sarah called to schedule an appointment, she stated that my flyer for recruitment of participants had been read during the community announcements session at her church. She allowed me to interview her in her home early in the morning as she worked in the afternoons at a juvenile facility. She also makes and sells exquisite lingerie to supplement her income.

The 63-year-old participant is raising two grandsons, now aged 17 and 15. The boys' mother died a little over a year ago at age 39. Sarah has had the boys since then. The participant's husband died 14 years ago and she described him as her childhood sweetheart. There was an older, third grandson who was living with her but he has now moved out on his own. She has three other adult children who live out of the home and also raised her sister's daughter, who is now an adult. These four are a support system for Sarah.

Her grandsons' mother was divorced from their father and he was not involved in their lives before her death. Sarah does not know the whereabouts of the children's father and she says the children greatly resent him. He has never paid child support and the participant will not pursue child support. The children receive Social Security benefits on her daughter's work record.

The participant admitted that it was difficult being a parent the second time around. She declared it was because children are different now; times have changed and she has also changed. She added that she is older than she was, with less patience than she had while raising her own children. She said she is bewildered, not knowing what to do when she encounters difficulties with her grandsons. She believes that God placed

them in her hands and it is her duty to care for them. She felt obligated to assume the caregiver role but she is glad to have someone else living in the home.

She acknowledged that her parenting skills are very much the same as they were when she was raising her own children. Although she realized that times have changed and that there are more diversions for children nowadays, she was reluctant to change her mind set. She thoroughly expected the children to behave in the same manner as her own children did. She denied that the death of their mother may have affected them in such a way as to cause their belligerent behavior. She stated that they behaved in the same manner when they lived with their mother. She feels there is a difference now only because when the children did not live with her, she did not feel the full impact of their behavior. She believes they resent an authority figure in their lives. She constantly tells them they will always have some type of authority figure in their lives so they may as well become familiar with that or there will always be trouble for them.

The younger child was suspended from school six times during the past school year and now has to attend an alternative school for troubled youths. Throughout the interview, the word, “disobedient” was mentioned many times in describing the children’s behavior.

The older grandson will finish school this year. The participant worries about peer pressure effects on both grandsons. She related an incidence when the older grandson was driving a friend’s car even though he did not have a driver’s license. The police attempted to stop him for speeding. Before the police reached the car, the friend told her grandson to take off because he had a gun in the car. The grandson sped away, only to hit another car. His friend began to shoot at the police. The police arrested both.

The grandson was charged but was able to have all charges changed to one lesser charge of “evading the police.” The participant stated that this was done with the help of her prayers and a good, expensive lawyer. This grandson was given probation and he has been compliant with its requirements.

Sarah avowed that she copes by praying. If she did not pray consistently, she does not think that she could function as her grandsons’ caregiver. She has been very direct in discussing gang involvement, drug activities, peer pressure, and sexual activities with her grandsons. She tries to instill in them the advantages of associating with people with positive attitudes, thoughts, and constructive ideas but she is not sure that they listen to her advice.

This participant was born and raised in Louisiana. Her father died when she was 10 years old and her mother raised Sarah and her four siblings alone. She stated that her mother taught her to work hard and to always do her best. At age 8, the participant began working regularly as a baby sitter. Her mother taught her to not expect someone else to provide for her or to give her anything. Sarah is proud that she has never been on welfare.

This participant stated she has often become frustrated even with something as mundane as trying to get the boys up in the morning when they do not want to get up and get ready for school. Sarah expressed her frustrations many times during the interview. She worries about what will happen to the boys if she dies. She has high blood pressure and she is sure that it is often elevated because of her worries and frustrations. She also has diabetes. She maintains a close check on her health problems by keeping her medical appointments and taking her medications, as she should.

Sarah attends church every Sunday and other church activities during the week when she is not at work. She said she has often asked her pastor and fellow church members for advice and guidance but feels they have not offered any advice she has considered helpful.

Sarah believes her whole life is God centered. She reflected on her husband's death, saying when he died, she neither cried or grieved. She related that before her husband died, she had a premonition that God spoke to her and told her, "...and I will wipe all tears from your eyes." She took this to mean she was going to die because she believed the only way all tears could be wiped from her eyes was for her to be dead. Following her husband's death, she went about usual daily living without losing control, and without having feelings of sadness and grief. She insisted that God spoke the same words to her right before her mother died 6 years later and again when her daughter died last year.

Sarah considers herself as being a SBW and said, "It's because I've been through a lot and have come out all right." She stated that troubles make one stronger and she believes that if a person encounters enough suffering, pain, and troubles in life, that person becomes stronger and does what is needed to be done. She went on to say that then the person can use this as a yardstick to measure how much of life's difficulties the person can endure.

Sarah admitted she is one of those persons who easily take on the problems of others, even when she has her own problems. She considers herself to be a very caring person said it does not bother her to cry with someone who has a problem and seeks her

help. However, she sometimes becomes overwhelmed when burdened with others' problems.

The participant discussed her values and beliefs and stated that a stable home life is important to her. She learned from her mother that a person should be happier at home more than anywhere else. A person should be happiest around the family than with anyone else. She also believes in being honest.

Sarah felt if a child does not live in a stable, two-parent home, then there should be mentors available for the child. She reflected back to the time when the people in the community were interested in all the community's children. She stated that today, the only people in the community interested in the children are the dope dealers. There are many dope houses in Sarah's community. She was thankful that her grandsons, she thought, had not yet become involved with the dope dealers. However, the worried expression on her face suggested that she may expect this to happen at some point.

The womanist concept was explained to Sarah. She stated that she would very much like to attend the focus groups to discuss forming a womanist group if she was available.

Researcher's Reflective Expressions—Sarah

Sarah has diseases that are problematic to many African Americans. She receives proper health care and diligently monitors the symptoms of her illnesses. Prior to the interview when we were speaking by telephone to schedule a time for the interview, she had to consider the date and time, as she was to have a colonoscopy. At the beginning of the interview, I asked how she was and I reminded her of what she had told me about the colonoscopy. She told me that her checkup had revealed a small polyp. Previously, she

had a colonoscopy that exposed a precancerous tumor that was later removed. She goes for regular checkups for this as well as for treatment for hypertension and diabetes. She was quite generous with providing information about herself and her grandchildren. During the entire interview, the participant exhibited a perpetual sad effect depicting worry and frustration. She did not smile, even one time, during the interview. I believed that she was definitely a candidate for a strengths based group although I was concerned she would not listen to suggested solutions to her problems from a womanist support group. I based this on her responses to the suggestions I made regarding obtaining mentoring services for her grandchildren. Sarah had asked me about my knowledge of mentoring services to teen boys. She had negative comments about each group I mentioned. I thought, to myself, does she really want help? I also wondered if she had really listened to her pastor and fellow church members from whom she sought help.

I was very impressed with her spirituality, values, and beliefs. However, she appeared reluctant to adjust her parenting skills to coincide with raising today's children. She tended to lean toward the authoritarian ways of raising children in the manner that many African American parents were known to do, especially during the time when she was growing up as a child. It was obvious that this method was not working for her. She consistently compares her own children's behavior to her grandsons' behavior and she does not seem to understand that these are different times with different children.

Martha

I met this participant's adult daughter while I was passing out flyers at the WLVAACC. She told me her mother was an AACG and she would give her the flyer.

The participant called me and we scheduled an interview at the WLVAC for a Sunday afternoon. On the day of the interview, this 67-year-old AACG was dressed all in white and she stated that she had just left church services. This was symbolic as it was the first Sunday of the month which is communion Sunday for those who practice the Baptist faith. Martha was very friendly and outgoing. She has raised 10 children of her own and is very close to most of her children. Family unity is very important to this participant. Her family members, consisting of most of her children and their families, enjoy a potluck type dinner together every other Sunday.

Martha is the caregiver for her 15-year-old granddaughter. This is the child of Martha's deceased daughter who died 5 days after being diagnosed with acute leukemia. The granddaughter was 3 years old at the time of her mother's death. Two other grandchildren, aged 4 and 6, also live in Martha's home and are the children of her son who is addicted to crack cocaine. Their mother is also addicted to drugs. Martha has raised the two smaller children since their infancy. She described her caregiving role as similar to raising her own children, using the same standards she used with her own children. Martha said she did not have a problem with parenting the second time around.

Martha has instilled a fear of God in all of her grandchildren. She also encourages her 15-year-old granddaughter to go to school, to get an education, to have a mind of her own, and to not be influenced by others who will lead her in the wrong direction. Martha admonishes this child if she believes the granddaughter is acting in ways that Martha described as being "womlish, trying to act like she's grown." Other lessons that she teaches her oldest grandchild and plans to teach the younger ones are to

decide what they want out of life; to set a goal for life, strive to reach that goal, and to never give up.

The participant has located the older granddaughter's father who lives out of state. He calls but not often and does not pay child support but his mother keeps in constant contact and often sends money to help.

Born and raised on a farm in segregated, Natchez, Mississippi, she married early. Her husband left the family behind and came to Las Vegas to look for work. Martha did not want to raise her children, especially her sons, in Mississippi in the 60s. She and her six children boarded a bus for Las Vegas in 1962 with \$4.50 and a bag of home cooked chicken. She found that her husband had become an alcoholic and she said she realized she had to do what was needed for her and the children to survive. Martha began to work outside of the home. On many occasions, she related that she endured domestic violence from her husband. One form of violence was for him to throw plates of food at her if he did not like a meal or if the meal was not hot enough for him. He would also hit her with whatever he could get his hands on and she admitted her self esteem was very low during this time. Finally, she garnered enough courage to leave him. Martha remarried and had four more children. Her second husband died while some of her children were still very young.

Martha did not believe in relying on help from social service agencies. Since coming to Las Vegas, she had always worked to support herself and her children. Sometimes she worked two jobs to support the family. She still believes what she was taught—that a person should be self reliant and self sufficient, no matter what it takes.

This extends to a belief that a person should do without if there is something the person does not have and is unable to obtain it.

She stated that she spends her days trying to keep everybody in her family, from her oldest child to the youngest great grandchild, focused on what they need to do in order to survive. She works at maintaining harmony in the family. She believes in trying to keep her family together. As she puts it, she strives to keep the family circle intact. Martha can also be described as a community mother as other children in the community reach out to her for support and guidance. She refuses to be intimidated by the gangs in her neighborhood. She says she has had confrontations with gang members but has been quick to not show fear.

Martha considers herself to be a SBW because she has been through a lot in her life but she was not discouraged. She has been able to persevere. She has never believed in the word “can’t.” She admitted to internalizing her weaknesses and hiding the truth from others as well as herself. She described her solution to this as: “Sometimes I stick my head in the closet and holler, and come out with that happy face as if I didn’t have a concern in the world.” At times when she feels stressed, she prays and talks to God and gets herself involved with reading or crocheting.

She receives support from an older individual who is a close friend. Martha considers this friend as a wise person who understands her problems. Her support system also consists of a large circle of other friends and her family members although she rarely discusses her problems with them. She is a dedicated church attendee but she does not particularly rely on her pastor or fellow church members for support.

Martha has discussed drug use, sexual activities, peer pressure, gang involvement, and the detriments of the end results with all of her grandchildren, including those who do not live in her home. She describes the 4-year-old grandson as exhibiting gay inclinations and this concerns her. She stated that he does not enjoy playing with toys that are considered for little boys but loves playing with his sister's dolls and other toys that little girls enjoy. This child also loves polishing his finger nails with different colors. Martha does not know how to handle this and she has sought advice from her adult sons. They suggested, and she has agreed that the child will probably grow out of it. Yet, she stated, that if he does not, he will be whatever he will be and she will accept it.

The participant was raised in part by her grandparents who she described as being very loving to her. She stated that her grandparents were the role models who inspired her in ways to raise her own children and grandchildren.

She discussed her childhood and has a vivid recollection of when she went to live with her mother and stepfather. Her mother would become intoxicated and the stepfather would attempt to molest the participant. She was always able to fight him off and when she complained to her mother after each incident, her mother would curse her for lying or totally ignore Martha's complaints. Finally, the participant developed a technique that she used to end the stepfather's advances. She would cover herself with a quilt and disappear into the woods near the home. She would remain in the woods until she felt it was safe to return home. This was usually when her stepfather was asleep in a drunken stupor. Yet, she still loved her mother very much and mourned deeply for her when she died years later.

One of Martha's beliefs is that whatever she endured in life, it has made her a better , stronger person, and it has enabled her to overcome any struggles. Therefore, she feels quite confident in being able to parent for the second time. She boasted that her children and grandchildren respect her values. They do not drink alcohol or smoke in her presence although she realizes some of them do one or the other or both. She stated that even those grandchildren, who do not live with her, come to her when they want to take a break away from their parents.

Martha was agreeable to participating in the focus group sessions. She believes that grandmothers in the same situation can learn from each other and that they need to learn more about raising today's children. She realizes that there is a difference in raising her own children and her grandchildren although she has not adjusted to the differences.

Martha's coping mechanisms are simple. She says she takes one day at a time and relies on God to help her throughout her day. She reflected on the afrocentric axiology of beauty is as beauty does. One can be beautiful physically and still have conduct and behavior that are not attractive or appealing.

Researcher's Reflective Expressions—Martha

I found Martha to be very friendly and outgoing at the onset of the interview. She was very expressive and I did not have to prompt her for information. I admired the close family ties that are established among her family members.

She became very teary when discussing her deceased daughter, the mother of the older granddaughter. I was able to feel her sorrow and my eyes became teary too and felt her grief. She looked at me and slightly smiled as if she felt relieved that I understood

what she was feeling and that she had not embarrassed herself by crying. Yet, I could tell that she tried hard to stifle a fullblown shedding of tears.

As I listened to her, I was surprised to learn Martha was an activist back in the 60's. Although she had not been a welfare recipient, she stated she marched in a welfare rights march to protest the discrepancy in welfare benefits between African American and Caucasian welfare recipients. I did research and found a newspaper article and a picture that described and depicted a march in the early 60s that included notable activists such as Jane Fonda and Rev. Ralph Abernathy, who was a cohort of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I had thought that for years, African Americans in Las Vegas were complacent in fighting for what they believed was right so I felt relieved to have learned this information.

I mentioned during the interview that I had been a single mother who had never allowed a man to move into her home "over my children." I felt that sharing this was really exposing myself but I thought I was disclosing information which the participant could relate to. The participant retorted, "Well, I did just that. Before we were married, I let my second husband move in with me and my children." This made me feel stupid and I was embarrassed and I worried she may have thought I was judgmental. I had been presumptuous in thinking that she would agree with my announcement of proper morals.

While growing up, Martha had acquired only a first-grade education. After many years and 10 children, she returned to school and received her high school diploma at age 44. I admired her and felt encouraged by my trying to obtain a doctorate at my age. She argued that, in her opinion, having an education means nothing without the knowledge of how to deal with everyday situations in life. I could see the intense look on her face

when she discussed her fears regarding her grandson's confused sexuality, although she stated she was willing to accept whatever his sexuality was. I wondered if she was being truthful to herself.

It was difficult for me to understand that this participant had deeply mourned the passing of her mother. This was the woman who refused to protect Martha when her stepfather attempted to molest her. Her mother would become inebriated and call her the foulest names. I was afraid that I would greatly offend her if I question her motives relative to loving her mother. Then I surmised that she appeared to be a very forgiving person and if she could forgive her mother, then so could I.

Catherine

This 54-year-old participant was a very pleasant, expressive, and intelligent woman. She was very talkative, and many times she led the interview. When the first question of the interview was asked, the participant spoke for two hours. In order to complete the interview, another date had to be scheduled. Catherine commented that she loved to talk. She often had to be redirected to complete the subject matter. She is 34 ½ inches tall and preferred to be referred to as a "little person" rather than as a dwarf. She uses a motorized scooter for mobility due to problems with her knees. She is able to drive a car, keep house, and work outside of the home part time. The participant lives in a neat, two-bedroom apartment with some furniture miniaturized for her size.

Catherine is raising her 10-year-old grandson who was born to a 15-year-old mother and the participant's 17-year-old son. She met the child's mother only once before the child was born. This child is biracial. The biological mother left the child in the hospital following birth as neither she nor her family wanted the child. The

participant's son discovered the abandonment only by accident. He and the participant were able to have the baby released to Catherine following guardianship legalities. The child's mother prefers not to be involved in the child's life and the participant's son is currently serving a prison sentence. He has been in prison since the child was an infant and is expected to be released in 2 years.

This participant is a previous show performer who has worked in carnivals and shows. She has also worked with famous entertainers. For years she owned her home in an upper middleclass community in Las Vegas. In answering the question of how she came to be a resident of the Westside, living in a small apartment, she explained this to be the result becoming disabled and not having the means to maintain the lifestyle to which she had become accustomed to for so many years. She has worked all of her adult life and she continues to work part time, sporadically at temporary jobs. Catherine and her grandson subsist on disability payments from Social Security and the income she receives from working temporary jobs. She receives no other assistance. The participant will not apply for welfare benefits for her grandson as she does not like the bureaucratic quagmire that she believes she would have to endure.

In addition to her son, she has an adult daughter who lives on her own. Catherine was married once but was separated from her husband at the time of his death a few years ago. She said her husband was never an essential part of the children's lives and described the children's father as being "like a piece of furniture in their lives."

The participant is the youngest of six children and grew up in the Pacific North West. She stated that she never encountered the difficulties of racism and discrimination

while she was growing up so she cannot relate to other African American women in her age group who grew up in the South.

Catherine said she has always believed she could do anything she set her mind to do. She has never believed she was handicapped but considers herself as being “handicapped.” At the present time, the participant stated she is disabled because her knee problems prevent her from walking without assistance. The doctors have told her that she is unable to have the necessary surgery and knee replacement at this time as it is difficult to obtain a prosthesis that will fit her. She will have to have a specially designed prosthesis that will take some time to make and she hopes her Medicare benefits will cover the costs.

In the beginning of her care giving role, Catherine was somewhat overwhelmed in caring for her grandchild. Now she declared that she is more patient, adept, and wiser than she was when raising her own children and she now has more time for raising the grandchild. She considers her grandchild to be the “glue that keeps our small family together.”

The participant said she is both tolerant and amused when her grandchild acts out with possessiveness and jealousy whenever her male friend calls on her. Because of HIV/AIDS, she admitted that she is not sexually active. Catherine has the support of a few friends and fellow members of her church. She spends a lot of time wondering if she will live long enough to see her grandson become an adult and worries that she will not. She offered no specific reason for thinking this even though she suffers with hypertension and diabetes. According to medical information, both are life threatening diseases. She believes that if the child’s father is unable to care for him, she can rely on her daughter to

do so. However, in her opinion, her daughter is a very selfish and self absorbed person who would not care for the child as the participant would want her to do.

The participant does not consider herself to be a SBW. She describes herself as being a determined woman who does what must be done. She said she never uses her height for an excuse to not endure but she uses it instead as a prop to encourage herself to do whatever needs to be done.

This participant was amazed that someone wanted to interview her in her role as a custodial grandmother. In her words, “With the exception of those African American women who are high profile, no one expects that African American women in any role, and especially those who are grandmothers, would have anything important to say.” The participant is interested in the womanist concept as defined for this study and favorably supports being a participant in a focus group. She believes she can be an asset to a self-help group and that she would have lots to offer. She also believes she can provide information as well as offer suggestions and encouragement.

Researcher’s Reflective Expressions—Catherine

At the time of the interview, I was amazed when I got out of my car in front of the participant’s apartment and saw a tiny person sitting on a motor scooter on the sidewalk. She identified herself as the participant that I was seeking. I found her to be a very friendly, talkative person and she was eager to be interviewed.

She invited me to have a seat at her kitchen table while she sat on the scooter. I asked, and received permission to sit on the floor near her to lessen the gap in distance. She elaborated on her previous work in the entertainment industry. She has traveled all over the world. She has been on several TV shows including the Phil Donohue Show. I

found myself mentally questioning the validity of the description of her celebrated events. She must have immediately noticed the questionable look on my face because she asked her grandson to bring in a couple of thick photo albums. In those books, I saw Catherine pictured with many well known entertainers and show business personalities. Many times, she was in costume. The truthfulness of her experiences was certain to me.

I was amazed when Catherine related that she was never taught the survival lessons she might have needed to succeed as an African American. She was taught that everybody is the same, which is a good thing, but everyone does not think the same way and this is not a realistic way of thinking. I believe, although she did not say, that she probably had some negative encounters in her life experiences, especially during the years she was involved in show business. Basically, she said there were no extraordinary lessons that she learned in terms of being taught what was or is needed to live in the world. Her worldview is to live and let live, a metaphor depicting her approach for survival.

Catherine attends the Seventh Day Adventist Church every Saturday. She believes in God and depends on prayer for support but she is not zealous about totally relying on a higher power in order to cope. She posits the attitude of completely believing in own ability to endure any pitfalls she may encounter. She thinks positively about her ability, in spite of her size, to properly and completely take care of herself and her grandson.

This participant was agreeable to participation in the focus groups for the purpose of discussing ideas and thoughts of forming a womanist support group. It was my opinion that she would make a good participant in a focus group. However, I wondered

if she could relate to others in the group as I felt that her life's experiences and upbringing did not parallel those of some of the other participants.

Marie

This 56-year-old participant is the mother of four children. After taking custody of her grandchildren, her mother assisted her in buying a small home on the Westside where she grew up. She refers to her community as "the hood." She is very proud to be a home owner. She is raising three grandchildren: one girl and two boys. All are teenagers. They are the children of one of her daughters who is heavily addicted to crack cocaine.

Marie did not want, nor did she expect to be an AACG. She was, and still is, very angry at her children's 38-year-old mother for not taking the responsibility of caring for her own children. Prior to gaining custody of the grandchildren, Marie learned that a male visitor at her daughter's home had made sexual advances to the granddaughter. The participant reported the incidence but the male visitor disappeared from the community.

Marie described this daughter as being selfish and self absorbed. The participant took the children from their mother just before the state authorities could remove the children from the home because of the reported neglect of the children. Marie believes taking custody of the children was something that she had to do, that it was her duty. She has cared for the children for the past 9 years. The children's mother visits often but when she leaves, there are always things missing from the participant's home.

The participant does not know the identity of the boys' father. Marie receives food stamps and Medicaid for the grandsons. The granddaughter receives \$900 per month in Social Security death benefits on her father's record. This granddaughter's

father was killed in a car accident a year ago. The granddaughter has chronic asthma and requires constant medical care but does not have health insurance. This child is too young for Medicare and the Social Security income makes her ineligible for any means-tested Medicaid benefits. The participant must pay out-of-pocket for the child's medical expenses.

Marie works two part time jobs and both pay a small amount, just over minimum wage. She does not have health insurance for herself. She does not earn enough to be self sufficient. She knows the \$200 per month she receives in food stamps is not enough to feed five people but feels it is better than nothing.

Marie complained about her attempts to seek help from the various agencies because she has been denied assistance many times. She feels that no one cares to listen to her talk about her needs and problems. She stated that when she explains her problems to a service provider she feels she is often ignored and she becomes very frustrated at "the system." Marie said she believes the various agencies' objective is an attempt to be defeating to the person seeking assistance and that helping professionals are not interested in learning about her and her care taking role. She feels they form opinions about her even before they meet her, and that they prematurely determine her problems without questioning her perceptions of what she believes are her problems. Marie felt some helping professionals are culturally aware but at the same time they do not know about her culture and are not interested in knowing. She stated, "Just because I live on this side of the tracks does not mean that I am stupid."

Marie said her grandchildren's behavior is much the same as her own children when they were growing up. However, she asserted that gang infestation in the

neighborhood and extreme peer pressures is more in existence now than when her own children were young. She said that nowadays since she and her grandchildren are concerned about this that when they leave the house, they do not wear the gang colors of red or blue. She says she constantly talks to her grandchildren about involvement with gangs and about succumbing to peer pressure, including those activities that are drug related or sexually indicative. Marie tries to teach them to be responsible but feels the children do not listen to her when she tries to teach them about the facts of life and this frustrates her. She believes that at her age, she does not have the patience needed to raise her grandchildren.

Marie's parents brought the family to Las Vegas from Louisiana in order to have a better life. Not long after, her parents separated and her mother continued to raise the participant and her six siblings as a single parent. Her mother also helped other family members who later moved from the South to Las Vegas.

She was raised by her mother in an autocratic manner—meaning, “Do as I say and don't ask questions,” and, “Don't think; you don't have an opinion.” Marie used this method to raise her own children and is still trying to use it to raise her grandchildren. She says this does not work for her; however, she has learned to apologize to the children if she believes she has behaved in a negative manner, such as yelling or screaming at them. She spoke of how she raised her own children and how the children's mother ignored what she had been taught.

Marie's husband left the home when their children were young and she said he is a drug addict to this day. Raising her own children alone was very difficult for her and as

she talked, she alluded to the sacrifices she made. She stated that many times when food in the home was scarce, she did not eat as she wanted her children to have enough to eat.

The participant uses prayer as a coping mechanism. She greatly acknowledges and pays honor to her mother and siblings as they have always supported her and go out of their way to assist her with taking care of her needs. She also has the support of her fellow church members. In discussing her belief in praying, she stated she has been taught that prayer is needed to survive and that nothing good can be achieved without it. For her, the act of praying is the same as talking to a therapist or a psychiatrist. The participant stated she often goes into a closet, gets on her knees, and prays. Sometimes she will cry for an hour or more but when she leaves the closet, she feels better and relieved of any previous pressures and frustrations.

Marie says that she does take time for herself. Sometimes she will leave her own house and go to her mother's house when her mother is not at home. The participant will lock the door and sit in the quietness of the house. She does this when she feels overwhelmed and thinks about taking custody of her grandchildren. She questions herself, asking herself why she is doing it. She finds satisfaction when she tells herself she is doing it to give the children a better chance to live, knowing that they would not have had that chance living with their mother.

Marie stated that she had plenty of mentors in her life who were SBWs and who guided her. Additionally, she related that she comes from a family of SBWs and that she was taught at an early age how to rely on her strengths. She tries to surround herself with other SBWs. However, she said she is not a super woman, trying to be everything for everybody.

This participant said she is willing to engage with other AACGs in the community because they have similar or like circumstance and can relate to each other. She believes that their combined voices can carry more influence in the community. She stated she was willing to participate in focus group discussions, along with other AACGs.

Researcher's Reflective Expressions—Marie

The interview with this AACG was 6 hours long, covering three lengthy sessions. At one of the sessions, I was offered lunch. At another, I was offered breakfast. I accepted both. Although she did not verbally express it, the participant's face seemed to reveal that she believed it was her fault the grandchildren's mother became a drug addict. Marie frowned and looked sad, as if she had a heavy heart, each time she discussed her daughter. I did ask if she believed that she was at fault. She stated she believed she had done a good job in raising her own children but that they made their own choices after they left her care. She stated, "After they went out to live in the world, it was up to them to take what I taught them and build on it. I raised them all the same way. She is the only one who strayed." I appreciated her openness and frankness regarding the children's mother.

I felt the participant's pride as she talked about the difficult steps she had to take in order to purchase her home. Yet, I sensed a feeling of guilt from her when she stated that her aging mother had to help her to purchase the home. I believed that she feels ashamed for having to depend on her mother and her siblings so much.

Although Marie expressed apprehension and appeared to be angry at times while discussing her care giving responsibilities, I believe she thrives on the challenges that confront her with having the children in her care. She made conflicting statements

relating to the children's behavior. For instance, she stated she expects the children to respect her by doing what she tells them to do without question but that she teaches the children to be independent minded and to question others if they find it necessary. In other words, it is okay to question other people, just not her.

Marie said she has not used the computer training she had received. I asked her why she had not and she replied that she believed that no one would hire her because of her age and race. I perceived this as an excuse for not taking advantage of an opportunity that could have benefited her and could have pulled her away from her two part time, almost minimum wage jobs. I found it strange that she did not even try. I could not help but wonder about the excuses she made when talking about how social service providers treated her. Although I did not doubt that her reasons were genuine, I questioned whether or not she may have exaggerated the service providers' behaviors. I felt she simply sought excuses for not pursuing the services and doing what was necessary to obtain the services she needed. For instance, she stated that when her granddaughter began to receive Social Security benefits on her deceased father's work record, her own Medicaid benefits were discontinued as she was ineligible due to the granddaughter's excessive income. The grandsons continue to receive Medicaid benefits. The participant does not have medical coverage. When asked if she had ever had medical coverage or why she did not request Medicaid benefits for herself, she replied that she probably would not have been eligible for benefits. She did not request to be added to her application for benefits for the grandsons and the case worker did not ask her if she wanted to be included. The participant perceived this as a denial of benefits for her.

Marie's voice projected strength, determination and stamina. I wondered if this might be a façade of fear and apprehension. Then I asked myself if I believed Marie depended too much on her mother and her siblings and did she use them as crutches? How will she survive if her mother dies? I could perceive her as a 54-year-old child rather than an adult. Still, she has assumed a responsibility that otherwise would be the State's responsibility. I am not so sure that I could do this. Regardless, my opinions do not count and do not take care of Marie's grandchildren.

Daisy

The participant lives in a three bedroom apartment in what is known as "the projects." She has lived there over 35 years. As a young married woman, she came to Las Vegas with her husband from Arkansas. Together they raised eight children. She is known as a community mother—a woman the neighborhood children always referred to as "mother" and in her later years as "grandma." Daisy has raised or assisted in raising all of her grandchildren.

Several of Daisy's own children have died from either acts of violence, drug overdoses, or HIV/AIDS. She raised all six children of a daughter who died from HIV/AIDS. I contacted this grandmother after she was featured in a newspaper article with one of her grandsons that she has raised. The article depicted a success story of the grandson who has defeated the odds of being raised on the Westside and is not following the path of his deceased mother who was drug addicted, nor his siblings who are all incarcerated. The grandson is now a college student who has great aspirations for achievement.

Daisy's household consists of a 34-year-old granddaughter who the participant raised from infancy, this granddaughter's 14-year-old son, and a 22-month-old granddaughter. The older granddaughter has been employed and contributing to the household expenses but at the time of the interview, the participant said her granddaughter was soon expected to be laid off from work. Although this granddaughter could live on her own along with her son, she refused to move from her grandmother's home as she promised her grandfather she would always take care of her grandmother and would never leave her.

The 22-month-old granddaughter is the child of the participant's son. The participant referred to the child's mother as a "street woman" who does not want the child. The child's father brought the child to the participant's home, and asked her to raise his daughter. He does not live in the home although extended family members move in and out of the home on a regular basis.

Daisy stated that she has raised grandchildren since she has had grandchildren. All have lived with her at some point in their lives if not for their entire lives. She does not consider herself as being successful in raising her own children but believes she did the best that she could. She raised the grandchildren in the manner that she raised her own children, using strong disciplinary actions in an autocratic manner.

After 47 years of marriage, Daisy's husband died, but not before he had made her a victim of domestic violence. She said they physically fought many times throughout their marriage but that she would not allow her children to intervene. She did not seek assistance from help agencies. She firmly believed then and still does now, that whatever happens inside the home should remain in the home. She stated she was not afraid of her

husband and she laughed about how she would “go toe-to-toe” with him during domestic upheavals.

The participant attends church regularly and she has attended the same church since she has been in Las Vegas. She is not as engaging with her pastor or her fellow church members as she feels she should be and that this was mainly because she was denied assistance from the church when she needed it. She related an episode that occurred some years ago. She said she has always religiously tithed every Sunday and has never missed paying her tithes. One month she needed assistance to pay her enormous utility bill of about \$200. Daisy asked her pastor for help and was referred to the church’s treasurer. Days afterwards, she was told the pastor had only approved a \$25 loan to her. She related this act left her feeling very discouraged and disappointed and that although she did not stop tithing, her devotedness to the church waned. She has not sought support of any type from her church since then.

The participant admitted to relying on God and prayer as coping mechanisms when she feels overwhelmed or stressed. “I turn it over to God and ask Him to take the burden from me.” She believes God will not allow her to have any problem that she cannot manage. She spoke of the time when her deceased daughter’s six sons were younger and the neighborhood gangs were trying to recruit them for gang activities. The participant challenged the gang members by telling them that her grandsons already belonged to a gang—her gang and that she was their leader. She told them to leave her grandsons alone as they would not be joining their neighborhood gang. However, there are six grandsons who are brothers—five are now in prison but the sixth is the college student mentioned earlier. Daisy said she believes one should take life as it comes. With

the exception of the attempted gang recruitment, she did not have any problems with the grandchildren while they lived with her home. Troubles began for the grandchildren when they grew up and moved away from her home.

The participant thinks of herself as a SBW because of her life's long struggles such as helping her widowed mother raise 11 other children, living 47 years with a sometimes violent husband, and raising her children and then her grandchildren in a crime ridden, poverty stricken community. She said she has endured her problematic life without benefit of assistance or reliance on others. She perceived herself as being able to cope with everyday living by using only her spiritual beliefs.

Researcher's Reflective Expressions—Daisy

I was very impressed with this participant. She made the statement that she enjoys caring for children and if she could take care of all children, she would because then there would not be a need for Child Haven, a county facility for abused, abandoned, and neglected children. I was also impressed by her role as a community mother and that she had raised the community's "golden boy"; the grandson featured with the participant in a newspaper article.

I was amazed when I drove up to the participant's apartment and noticed a Cadillac parked in the driveway. It was not a late model car but still a Cadillac. I thought to myself that perhaps this participant was not in dire straits and was probably living quite comfortably, even in a public housing complex. I was rendering judgment on someone I had not even met. During the interview, I discovered the participant did own the Cadillac, yet she lived in public housing and I wondered why, when her husband was alive, they lived in public housing for many years. She stated that she had lived in public

housing for over 40 years. Didn't they want a better home for themselves and their children? It appeared to me that her children, who are still alive, are not interested in helping her. Yet, they depend on her for support. Extended family members are always moving in or out, taking from her. She feels that she must allow them to do that as familial connectedness is important to her.

I also wondered why she continued to live with a man who beat her? Was it really because of what she had learned from her mother relating to marriage vows, that she believed the vows should not be taken lightly, that a couple should stay together no matter what? She did not allow her children to intervene when she and her husband fought, even when her children became adults. This certainly did not, in my opinion, mean that she was a SBW. She stated she did not fear her husband. However, I still saw it as being fearful—maybe not necessarily of him, but fearful of taking her children, leaving him and attempting to live on her own.

She is 70 years old and has given thought to what would happen to the 22-month-old child she is raising should she become infirmed or should she die. She seemed to depend on her 34-year-old granddaughter to step in should this happen. She realizes that her son, the child's father, is in and out of jail constantly. The fact that the mother does not visit or take any interest in the child indicates she does not want her.

I had to admit to myself that living as Daisy does is her way of life and seemingly, it is all that she knows. She appeared to be quite satisfied with the way she had lived and is presently living. She is greatly dependent on her spiritual beliefs.

Pat

As with the some of the other participants, this participant did not expect that she would be raising grandchildren. The widowed participant is 56 years old and is raising four grandchildren; two teenage girls, ages 13 and 14, and two boys, four and five. The participant had four children of her own. The grandchildren's mother, the participant's daughter, died from bladder cancer 3½ years ago at age 26.

The participant's daughter left home at age 15 because she did not want to follow house rules. She had her first child at age 16. In discussing her daughter's short illness prior to her death, Pat gave very detailed descriptions of her conversations with her daughter as she was dying. The participant appeared to be relieved and relaxed in being able to talk about how she comforted her daughter and advised her to let go of life. Pat said she assured her daughter that she would take care of the children and keep them together. The participant said that at that time her daughter seemed to be free from worry and anxiety and then appeared to stop resisting the ravages of death and became calm and peaceful. Pat said her daughter died soon after she offered her those assurances.

Pat claimed that at the beginning of her care giving role, she had a problem switching from the grandmother role to a mother role. The participant spoke of the two girls becoming "womlish"; a term used to mean maturing in ways before it is time. She insists on knowing the granddaughters' friends which sometimes agitates them.

She stated she relies on her spirituality for coping, not only in raising her grandchildren, but also for her entire life choices and decision making. She believes the events that occur or have occurred in her life are the work of God, and that there is not anything she can do but accept them. She spoke amiably and loyally about her deceased

spouse and asserted that he was a very good husband and father. She alluded that she had accepted his death as God's will. She believes that she could have been a better mother to her deceased daughter. She blames herself for the daughter leaving home and living on her own at such an early age. She could not explain why she blames herself. She said the guilt she feels causes her to be depressed at times. These guilt feelings are sometimes relieved when she thinks about being given a second chance at motherhood. She feels she has been given the opportunity to make up her perceived shortcomings to her daughter by raising her daughter's children.

The participant said her three adult sons and other family members are a great support system for her. She also related she has a nice boyfriend but that they are not in a serious relationship. She enjoys his companionship and friendship although she does not foresee herself remarrying. She believes her grandchildren would greatly resent her if they perceive her as having a permanent relationship with any man.

Pat attempts to involve herself in every aspect of the children's lives. She does this in an effort to lessen the stress of being troubled by possible gang involvement, sexual activities by the two granddaughters, and peer pressures. She feels that the girls often ignore her and do not listen to her. She is thankful that all of the children enjoy participating with the local Boys and Girls Club where they can engage in various wholesome activities.

The participant has health problems that concern her. She receives Social Security Disability income for her physical disorders. She is distressed by the major illnesses that are known to greatly affect many African Americans such as hypertension

and diabetes. Her physician has suggested she may have Multiple Sclerosis and she plans to see a neurologist.

She says she does not believe in seeking assistance from social service agencies unless it is absolutely necessary. She receives welfare and Medicaid benefits for the children, but she will not consider seeking other assistance. She averred that social workers tend to make a person feel humiliated. She said she experienced feelings of humiliation when she sought financial and medical benefits for the children.

Pat considers herself as being a SBW because she feels she can manage and cope with anything that may confront her. She admitted she almost failed in her beliefs when her daughter left home. She stated, “Then I realized that I had to turn it over to God or I would mess it up in trying to work it out. The things my daughter was doing was out of my reach.” She believes it is not a SBW, but God who solves problems.

Pat was interested in participating in a focus group. She believes that everyone is responsible for all children and, that AACGs, particularly, should be involved in helping each other. Once she understood what a womanist is as defined for this study, she stated she would like to make her contribution to efforts of forming a womanist focus group.

Researcher’s Reflective Expressions—Pat

Talking about her deceased daughter appeared to be therapeutic for the participant. I felt that she really needed and wanted to talk. It was very heart wrenching to learn that a month after the participant’s daughter died, the participant’s husband was killed in a gang shooting crossfire as he was coming home from work. Then a month later her mother died. We both cried as she related the details of these deaths. The memories of my deceased loved ones returned and I could not contain myself. I got the

feeling that the participant needed someone to cry with her and I was that person. She had previously stated she had not really grieved over her losses. Rather she had assisted other family members through their grieving process. Other family members had commented to her that she had displayed being a SBW, feeling the need to help others and doing that, rather than showing any or acting out any signs of her own grief.

The day of the interview, all of her grandchildren were present. The participant and the grandchildren overslept and did not awaken in time for her to take them to school. She drives each of them to school except the youngest child who remains at home with her. I thought that this was a little irresponsible. When I suggested that I could come another day, she stated that she would rather I remain. I was so happy to have the opportunity to do the interview that I did not insist on changing the day of the interview. The house was very noisy and there were many interruptions by the children throughout the interview. The participant did not offer an apology but I persevered.

The participant seemed rather relaxed and did not seem to mind how long the interview took. While I asked a question, I found I had to give examples of what I was seeking. I used parables or short stories as examples as they related to me in order for her to understand the question I was asking. For instance, I asked about the behavioral differences between her children and her grandchildren. She appeared lost for words or as if she did not understand the question. I had to give her an example, using myself, of what I was talking about.

I believed that although she stated she considered herself to be a SBW, she probably had never thought about herself as being one. During the interview, she said just what I expected her to say—that she was not strong because of her being a Black

woman, but she was strong because her strength comes from a higher power. In my opinion she is a very strong woman. I wondered if I could be or would have been as strong if I had to endure as much grief. I admired her.

Pat was not able to fully explain exactly what it was she had learned from her mother and other significant females in her life. I offered plenty of examples and parables to explain the question but she was not able to provide a concrete example other than to say that she respected her mother and the women who had been influential in her life. She could not provide what she had learned that made her believe she was a SBW.

It appeared that Pat does not mind parenting her grandchildren. Although she denied this, doing so had probably helped her to persevere and to deal effectively with her grief and sorrow. What she stated was that she must, by any means necessary, keep the family together. She promised her daughter, as she was dying, that she would keep the children together.

Selma

This participant was referred by Pat. Selma is a 68-year-old widow and lives two houses away from Pat—the two are very close friends. Selma is the mother of five children and is raising her teenaged grandchildren, a boy and a girl who both attend high school. They are her daughter's children and the participant has raised them since infancy. Selma also raised an older grandchild but he is an adult and lives out of the home. This AACG described herself as an evangelist, and is deeply rooted in her religious beliefs.

She stated that she had not expected to raise grandchildren. However, she believes it was her duty to care for these children as she did not want someone else to do

it. By raising the children herself, she felt she could teach them the values to which she adheres. That is, to fear God, to respect others, and to respect themselves. Selma believes she has raised her grandchildren in such a manner that they will become successful and productive citizens.

Selma denied having any problems with her grandchildren and claimed she has yet to experience difficulties with them. She said when she recognizes a potential problem, she quickly acts by taking the child aside and having an earnest and calm discussion with the child. Together, they come to an agreement about the potential problem. She tells the children that if they do not want to discuss a situation or problem with her, they are encouraged to speak with another adult they trust. She leaves the decision to the child. She encourages this technique if they are experiencing peer pressure or if someone attempts to induct them into a gang.

The participant described the children's mother as "being out and lost in the world." It seems that the daughter did not want the responsibility of raising her children. This daughter simply told her parents that she wanted them to raise the children and she left. The participant never questioned her daughter or insisted that she care for her own children. Her daughter makes sporadic visits to the home. Selma says her daughter is addicted to drugs.

Selma is aware of the differences in the behavior of the grandchildren and the behavior of her own children when they were young. She believes this is because of the way society has changed. She attested that another reason is the way parents present themselves to their children. She used the example of parents who treat their children as equals—the type of parent who claims to be a buddy to a child rather than a parent. She

believes that many children today do not respect their parents as parents, but as friends or buddies.

As with many African Americans of her generation relative to a child's behavior, Selma believes in autocracy—the “do as I say” without questioning and that children should be seen and not heard. She believes that because raising her grandchildren has not been difficult for her, and that since they have lived in her home since their birth, she is able to cope and persevere.

Selma was taught by her parents to work hard and to not depend on anyone else to take care of her. Essentially, she was taught to know what was expected to be the concerns of both men and women, such as knowing how to support a family, to pay bills, to be responsible for herself and her children, and to do this with the least amount of assistance from others. She was also taught to associate with people who had positive outlooks. She stated she frequently reminds her grandchildren “to beware of the company” they keep.

The participant considers herself to be a SBW and believes she can handle any situation or challenge with the help of God. She stated that if others confront her with a problem, she will not take their problems on her shoulders. Instead, she prays for the person, asking that they will receive an intercession from God to solve the problem. Her coping mechanisms are fueled by her spiritual beliefs and by her ability to control her everyday life situations. She refuses to allow any problems to interfere with her abilities to care for her home and her grandchildren.

Researcher's Reflective Expressions—Selma

The interview was short. There were many telephone interruptions. She stated that most calls were from her fellow church members, seeking her advice on different subjects. Apparently, they all had great respect for her.

She asked me what church I attended. I fully expected that question from her when she told me that she was an evangelist. When I told her that I was not a dedicated member of any church but that I did believe in God, I sensed a concerned look of regret from her. Was I, in her mind, a sinner?

I found it hard to believe that she had never had any problems with either of her grandchildren, especially when they became teenagers. Her coping mechanisms seemed too effortless. She exuded an almost perfect life for her and the grandchildren.

I was puzzled that she did not consider her daughter, the children's mother, to be remiss in her responsibilities of raising her own children. She explained that her daughter is someone who made poor choices and that she needs the strong spiritual hand to lead her back to the right path that the participant taught her to follow. The participant ignored the fact that her daughter is not a present influence in her children's lives and continues to remain distant from her children. I got the feeling that the participant does not want her daughter involved in the lives of the children for fear that they might want to leave her and go to live with their mother. I do not believe that the children's mother would try to gain custody of the children. I also believe that the participant could be using a bit of wishful thinking about her daughter straightening out her life.

Narrative Summary

For the study, the afrocentric place was the center for the data collection process. This meant that both the study participants and I, as researcher, were rooted in African American history and culture. The participants and I were located centrally and not on the margins of the study. Working on the assumption that the study participants and I have been socialized and acculturated into the African American experience, the experience of that existence and, as Asante (1990) suggested, understandings of that history and culture were observed. This means that an appropriate data collection effort and an effective transmittal of the stories about their life experiences, and about their beliefs, ideas, behaviors, their concepts, and understandings, were ensured.

Except for one, all participants were fully focused on what the research entailed. Without hesitation or prompting, they were eager to tell their stories, describe their experiences, and expose their secrets.

To the grandmothers, living on the Westside means that they are perceived as a particular class of people located on the lower rung of the socioeconomic ladder, and that they are unable to advance out of the community. They have lived in the area for so long, they are not sure that they would want to move out. They are aware of how local society views residents of the Westside. They have learned to survive. They have learned to cope with the negative attributes of the community, such as gang violence, drug activity including crack houses, prostitution, pandering, and other unsavory elements. In some respect, they do not perceive the Westside as being a totally difficult place to raise their grandchildren as long as they can keep the open dialogue with the children, rallying against peer pressure, and abstaining from the community's atrocities. One participant

related: “It’s not in the land, it’s in the man. In my case, the woe man” (meaning woman). Caring for their grandchildren offers the grandmothers a type of everyday hurdle for them to attempt to cross each day. Another participant related, “I take one day at a time. *The individual interviews allowed the participants to escape from the historical stance and position of not having anything important to say. They allowed me to capture their experiences in their own context. They were allowed to give voice, to express their beliefs, values, experiences, their hopes and dreams. I was able to understand the meanings of their body movements, gestures, phrases, metaphors, rhythmic speech, word emphases, and expressions because I am part of the culture that taught them. Also, I was able to glean questions for the focus group discussions from the individual interviews.

Testimony: Fighting the Battle and Sharing the Strength

During the individual interviews, I had informed the participants where I was employed and had given each one my business card with my work telephone number. I told them I worked as a social worker with Alzheimer’s patients and their families, and that I worked directly with neurologists who treat patients with multiple sclerosis and other neurological illnesses.

Soon afterwards, one of the participants, Pat, called me at work to ask for help to obtain an appointment with a neurologist. I told her that I would get her an earlier appointment than the one she could get, which was 3 months from then. During our discussion, she asked when I would contact the participants again regarding the review of their interviews. I informed her that it would be some time as I was entering the hospital

for surgery the next week and would be unavailable for approximately 3 months. I could hear the question she wanted to ask me although she did not ask directly. I told her my diagnosis and the surgery procedure that was to be done. When she inquired, I told her the name of the hospital I was entering and that it is very near the Westside. She asked if I would mind a visit from her.

On a Saturday morning, following a 3-hour surgical procedure and a period in the recovery room, I was taken to the intensive care unit. Within a short period of time, Pat walked in. I imagine that I looked a sorry sight to her with two blood transfusion bags going, tubes, and other apparatuses hooked up to my body. She took my tube and wire-filled hands and told me she was praying for me and that I was going to be all right because “she had gone to the Lord on me.” She said she felt very assured of my recovery. With those words and with her head bowed, holding my hands, she began to pray softly. I cried. After praying, she found a towel and washed my face and brushed my hair. Here she was, a woman I had met in person just once, for a 2-hour interview.

Soon afterwards, my surgeon came in and looked strangely at her, not knowing whether or not she was a relative. I gestured to let him know that it was okay for her to be there. After such a sincere prayer, I did not have the heart to ask her to leave nor did I want her to go. The surgeon proceeded to tell me the outcome of the surgery and the prognosis. He told me that the prognosis was bleak. Listening to his words, suddenly I felt as if I was in the worst place that I have ever been in my life. With the tubes in my throat, I could not speak clearly or loudly. I rose up slightly and looked him in the eyes and said as forcibly as I could, “I ain’t stud’in you.” I don’t know why I used that vernacular. I was not listening attentively to what he had to say any further.

He looked at the participant and asked her, “What did she say?” I remember Pat saying, “She said that she is not hearing you. That means that she is not listening to what you are saying to her. God has the final sayso. We know how and what to do in times like these. She has entered a spiritual place.” I think that she meant to say that I was entering a spiritual plane for guidance and direction. It was as if she could read my mind. Again, I began to cry but with tears of hope and with a feeling that I was already being blessed with the energy and perseverance to fight this battle to survive. My outlook did not look to me to be as bleak as the doctor had suggested. He was ever so wrong if he thought that I was merely going to roll over and be done with it. It was as if I had acquired the strength that I had forgotten I had and this AACG had been there to remind me that I had it and she was sure that I knew what to do.

My thoughts were that she and I shared the same cosmological and ontological perceptions in this matter. I do not know why I used the expression, “I ain’t stud’in you” but the participant knew what it meant and was able to explain it to the doctor in my stead. She visited me every other day during my hospital stay and she called on the days she did not come.

Later on during my hospital stay, I was walking the hall assisted by a physical therapist when I heard someone call my name. It was Daisy who is raising her son’s 22-month-old daughter. She was visiting her 34-year-old granddaughter who was confined to the same floor. The granddaughter and her 14-year-old son (the participant’s great grandson) lived with the participant. She has raised this granddaughter since infancy. She too visited with me awhile each day. She prayed with me before she left to return to her granddaughter’s room where she sat with her all day, every day. Sometimes, she and

Pat visited me at the same time. They lived close by to each other and knew each other in passing. Pat asked if she could visit me at home until I was up and about. I told her that she could.

Upon my returning home, both continued to call me often to see how I was doing. Pat visited and discussed with me, more about her role as an ACCG and some of the problems that she was having with one of her granddaughter's absent and putative father. He had threatened to take the granddaughter away from her. Pat was not even sure that he is the child's father. He has seen the child only once and in her presence. She believed that since the granddaughter is a teenager, the father had ulterior motives for wanting to bring the child to his bachelor apartment for visits and she refused to allow the child to go.

Alice, Sarah, Martha, and Marie called me stating that they had tried calling me earlier as each wanted to know when the focus groups were scheduled and when they would receive copies of their transcripts. I explained about my hospital stay. Each was very concerned and wondered why I had not advised them that I was ill. From then on, I had six participants who continued to visit and or call me. Daisy, who visited me in the hospital, continued to visit with her granddaughter each day until the granddaughter passed away a few weeks later. She also continued to call me. She now has her deceased granddaughter's 14-year-old son to continue raising alone. All of these AACGs prayed with me, held my hands, asked to run errands for me, or merely just talked.

I learned much more about these six women, but to me, it seemed to be on a different level. I learned about events in their lives since their last visit or telephone conversation. A few had met one another during these visits. I was thinking that this

should be a good focus group. The affective way of knowing was surely shown between these AACGs and I. It amazed me that one of the goals of the study was to encourage them to think in terms of forming a strengths based support group. Each of the six participants, in her own way had shared her strength with me and I was able to glean from each one, exactly what I needed to fight my illness. I knew where to go and I knew what to do. They did not give me time to feel sorry for myself or to bathe in self pity.

CHAPTER 5

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

What it Means

Most of the participants were close in age and from the Deep South or were raised by parents who migrated to Las Vegas from the South. They grew up in similar times thereby their meanings were similar, based on what they had learned as part of their upbringing.

The ages of the participants ranged from the oldest at 72 years, to the youngest at 48 years. The ages of the grandchildren they are raising ranged from 22 months to 18 years. The AACGs all reside in scattered areas on the Westside in public housing apartments (the projects), small rental homes, and apartments that were not public housing. One resided in a small modest home her mother had helped her purchase. Three resided in homes they had purchased with their late spouses.

Seven of the grandmothers are raising the children of their daughters. Two are raising the children of their sons. The tenth AACG is actually the great grand aunt of the child she is raising. This child was born behind prison walls and the mother has been in and out of prison since the birth. Two of the children's parents are incarcerated. Three parents are alive but live away from their children. Five parents are deceased parents. Only one succumbed to a drug related illness. One parent was killed in a car accident. The other three deceased parents died suddenly from quick developed cancer. Two of the

living parents are addicted to drugs and have been in and out of jail. Another parent lives out of state and has not made any attempt to bond with her now teenaged daughter.

Seven of the mothers bore their children when they were very young teenagers.

One participant's adult grandchild living with her died during the study period and the AACG is raising her deceased granddaughter's child. The deceased granddaughter's own mother (the participant's daughter) died years ago from HIV/AIDS brought on by sharing drug needles.

Aversion to Applying for Social Services

All but one of the participants receives some type of income by either employment or monthly Social Security benefits. Most of the grandchildren receive Medicaid benefits. One grandmother depended totally on welfare benefits for the children and receives Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits for herself. Although others believed that they might be eligible for other benefits, most stated that the less they engage with "the other systems," in terms of applying for and receiving benefits, the better off they were.

All of these AACGs drove and owned cars which provided them a sense of independence. Most of them implied that some of the agencies alienated their prospective clients by overwhelming them in what they perceived as endless and needless rules, regulations, and red tape. Marie alluded:

When I was younger, I tried to deal with all that stuff that they ask you to do. After doing what they told me, I would take the paperwork back and then find out that they had forgot to tell me something so I had to do more paper work. By the time I completed or thought that I had completed everything, my problem was over.

When asked for an example, Marie went on:

When my son, the youngest, was about 10 years old, I applied for Section 8 and my name was placed on the list. Finally, when my son was 17 years old, soon to be 18, I received a letter stating that my name had come up and was I still interested in receiving Section 8 housing benefits. Needless to say, I had an answer for them that I won't repeat to you because it wouldn't be ladylike.

Martha said she learned to stand on her own two feet and to not be "crippled" by dependence on others to do things for her. She said being on welfare was an example about being crippled by depending on something or someone other than God and self.

Spatial Environment

All of the participants appeared to be comfortable in their surroundings whether the interview was at their home or at the WLVACC. For those who were interviewed at home, the homes were very neat, clean, and orderly. Each participant was very hospitable and I was offered refreshments or a full meal. The participant and I both partook of the refreshments or the meal. One participant remarked about her feelings metaphorically, as our "breaking bread together." She commented that although she did not know me, she felt relaxed and comfortable with having me in her home and it offered her a desire to want to participate in the interview. This gesture of accepting refreshments or a meal, breaking the ice, made me believe I was less of an outsider. At the same time, there was not a hint of one being perceived as superior over the other. To the participant and me, we were two females; one who was giving information and answering questions and one who was taking in information and asking questions.

When the interviews were held in their homes, mostly in their kitchens, the participants felt comfortable talking while moving about. My body movements and eyes

followed them as they moved from the sink to the stove, back to the table where I sat, then up again to move about, never needing to be reminded of the subject matter. This style of discourse led them to move from one subject to another, giving examples and scenarios of the topics. Often they placed their hands on their hips or pointed a finger, or raised an opened hand. I observed their physical gestures such as “goose necking” to emphasize a point. Their sentences were often prefaced by “girl, let me tell you, “or “chile” (for child), or “you wouldn’t believe....” For instance, Marie said, “I told him a thing or three. I told him you ain’t got nothin’ for me I want. Him talking his trash. Everytime he tried to say something, I told him to talk to the hand.” At this point in the interview Marie raised an opened palm to illustrate that the phrase meant she was ignoring and not listening to what the man was saying. Another example was when Selma stated, “Hey, my mama didn’t raise no fool.” The word *raise* was extended as in “raaaaaise.”

Hello and *Amen* were words that were consistently used throughout the interview by the participants and me. “I can catch hell all by myself.” “Hello,” either the participant or I would say in agreement or “Amen to that.” For example, I remembered commenting, “Hello!” after Martha alluded:

When I left my first husband, my children’s daddy, you know, the one who used to beat me, I remember saying to myself; I’m leaving here. One monkey don’t stop no show. Little did I know that there were a bunch of monkeys out there just like him.

A high comfort level was indicated when two of the participants used the “n” word in the course of telling their stories relating personal details about male and female relationships. In discussing African American men and what she thought about their impact and effects on African American women, Alice stated, “Niggers and flies, I do

despise.” Poetically and metaphorically, she was placing a Black man in the same category as a housefly. And Sarah related:

I taught myself how to do handy work long before my husband died. He had bought paneling to do the dining room. It took him so long to do it that I decided to put it up myself. When he came home from work, he saw what I had done. He asked me, ‘What niggah been in my house doing my work?’ I knew that he was joking and we both laughed about it.

In afrocentric research, attention is paid to symbols, affect, instincts, and imagery as multiple ways of knowing (Asante, 1990). In some of the homes, there were pictures or hanging glass plates depicting the honored trio in a group setting: President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy. In every home I visited, the Bible was displayed on a coffee table or where it could be observed and some were opened to a certain passage. Some of the homes had African artwork and motifs. There were pictures depicting African Americans engaged in a church setting and pictures or clay models portraying the Last Supper with Black human images.

During the interviews, sometimes the participants and I found ourselves completing sentences for each other and seeming to know what the other was going to say before it was said, and nodding in agreement. Emotional reactions represent a way of knowing (Akbar, 1984). All of this was displayed during the individual interviews. I was not referred to as Miss, Mrs., Ms. or by my first name. All of the participants with the exception of two called me Sister Jackson. The other two called me “girlfriend.”

Reaching Out

There was concern for family members who did not live in the home or in the state. Pat stated, “I just have to get back down there to see Aunt C. She’s sick. You

know, she helped to raise me too. She was my mother's sister , you know. Yeah, chile, we can't forget about those folks who brought us through." Or, as Selma stated:

You know what they say about Black folks. We're like crabs in a bucket. When one of us tries to crawl out to do better for ourselves, the others are steady pulling him back down in the bucket. Not me, I believe in uplifting and helping out. So when somebody looks to me for help, I try to do my best to help them to get on with their life.

Selma went on to tell stories about her relatives or relatives and friends of people she had known down South who came to Las Vegas looking for a better life:

I let them come here to live with me until they can do better for themselves and start out on their own. I don't charge them a thing. I just tell them to remember that someone helped them to get across and I tell them to pass it on.

Each of participants defined a sense of community for themselves, although in different ways. They all felt they were a part of something beyond themselves and their families. For instance, just as she did when she was younger, Alice still feels the music and entertainment world is a part of her community. She continues to be involved with musicians and other artists, and relies on them for assistance, as a source of socialization, and as an extended family unit yet she considers herself to be highly self reliant. Some of the participants are greatly involved with their church. It is more than a Sunday morning contact or involvement for both Sarah and Selma. They rely heavily in the covenants of their church such as putting God first and foremost in their lives and they both have made Him the head of their households. Both of these participants are raising their grandchildren to respect God. They ask God to supply their needs and they respect, without question, any outcome as God's decision.

At Ease

Most of the participants perceived their concerns and thoughts about themselves as selfish acts. They believed that there were more immediately important things than themselves. Problematic situations, such as financial dilemmas, are not unique. That has always been. When Anna was asked if she was concerned about finances, she answered:

Isn't everybody? Who in this world does not have financial problems?
Even the rich people worry about finances. So what else is new with me?
I know how to do without and I don't dwell on having material things.

In essence, most of the participants have always endured some type of financial burden, even before they became AACGs, and some even when they were married. Some have had to juggle resources their entire lives. They all appeared to be content with doing the best that they could or knew how to do. As one participant stated:

It is a blessing to be able to provide a roof over these children's heads,
give them food to eat, and make sure that have enough clothes. Anything
else is a blessing—praise the Lord. This teaches them to appreciate
things.

Most of the participants appeared to be overweight. By their admissions and by the researcher's observation, they do not follow good dietary habits. Marie prepared breakfast and lunch for herself and the researcher. Breakfast consisted of grits loaded with butter and cheese, eggs, hot homemade biscuits with butter and jelly, sausage and bacon, coffee, and juice. She said:

You know how we love to eat and I do believe in fixing a good meal. I
don't worry about a diet. It's a blessing to have good food on the table to
eat so why should I deny myself such a blessing?

With the exception of being overweight, they all took great pride in their appearance. For the interview, they dressed appropriately and looked their age with, in the researcher's opinion, the exception of Alice. Alice was interviewed at the WLVAAC,

and this 65-year-old participant was attired in low cut black jeans with heavy decorative silver chains extending from the many pockets on the jeans and a short, cropped shirt that exposed her navel with its navel jewelry. She had long red, mixed with blonde, extension braids and wore a black stovepipe-type hat. She may have sensed my observation of the way she was dressed, because she exclaimed, “Grandmas have come a long way, baby!” When I visited her home for subsequent interviews, she was dressed simply in jeans and a tee shirt.

Satisfaction

None of the participants admitted to having meaningful relationships with significant others. One or two did admit to what they referred to as keeping company with a man but it was mostly for companionship. None admitted to having a male friend living in their home. Marie retorted, “I don’t need no man shacking up with me over these children.” Most of these AACGs believed that, at this stage in their lives, they did not need male intimacy. Alice related that she has been celibate for over 30 years and she did not have a need for male intimacy or companionship. All of the participants stated that they were afraid of putting their lives in danger because of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Mary further stated, “You know, as far as I am concerned, I have taken a needle and sewn it up.” When asked about remarrying, Selma exclaimed, “Honey, I got a husband—God.

Getting Another Chance

So far, there have not been any teen pregnancies among the grandchildren, unlike some of their mothers or one of the fathers, who were teenagers when the children were

born. The grandmothers of these young girls and boys believe this is a positive aspect of their present nurturing.

For the daughters who became teenage mothers, including the ones who have died, the grandmothers blame themselves for their daughters' entry into early parenthood. For the deceased mothers, the grandmothers feel they cannot remedy what they consider to be their fault. Although they realize they did the best they knew how to do in bringing up the grandchildren's mothers, these AACGs feel that by raising their grandchildren they can make up for their own perceived negligence in raising their own children. Their teary demeanor while discussing their daughters' deaths evidenced their sadness and feelings of guilt. Raising their daughters' children makes them feel that they have the opportunity to right their perceived errors.

I Am Because You Were

Some of the participants were raised by their grandmothers or their grandmothers played a primary role in their upbringing. The AACGs reflected back on what they were taught by females who were a major influence in their lives. Most of them do not question what they were taught as being right or wrong. For them, they consider that those lessons taught to them must be adhered to because a female whom they respected said so.

Narrative Findings—The Answers

The information gathered during the individual interviews answered the central research questions by describing the methods used by the grandmothers to cope and manage the responsibility of raising their grandchildren. The information also provided

the definition of the participants' perception of the SBW concept. The results of the interviews described how the SBW concept and the participants' spirituality were the driving forces that gave them the motivation to raise their grandchildren and how they maintained focus on their care giving responsibilities.

Coping

The general answer was that the participants first relied on their spirituality to cope with the responsibility of raising their grandchildren and for confronting any challenges they encountered in their everyday experiences. Alice was the one exception and she declared that she relies first on herself, and then maybe on God. The others proclaimed that their relationship with God is all that they need and that this reliance upon this relationship is their main coping system. They said they were sustained by their belief in a higher power and the need to be obedient to the Lord. Sarah answered the general question with, "I live my life by praying to God and looking for His divine guidance. I don't make a move unless I seek His wisdom first. This is the only way I can cope with anything." And Martha answered:

When I feel like crying and I get burdened down, I fall on my knees and tell it all to the Lord and then I forget about it. He handles it for me. If He don't do what I pray for, then I take it as my burden and I deal with it.

The participants related that in an effort to instill profound fear in them, they talk to the children consistently about such issues as gang and drug involvement, peer pressures, and premature sexual activities. From Sarah:

With this youngest boy, I told him the other day to use condoms if he must do that.... It's okay to masturbate as long as you do it in private in your room. I know that he needs to release pressure somehow.... But I always emphasize the word 'no' and no means no. Rape ain't no joke.... I preach the same sermon every day. Sometimes three or four times a day.

Maybe some of it will stick. You know, it is hard for a woman to teach a boy how to be a man. Not only that, but it's hard to teach them how to be Black men in America.

Some participants have family members, friends, or fellow church members living close by that they rely on for various degrees of support, especially with their complaints regarding problems with the grandchildren. Often, these AACGs do not adhere to or follow the suggestions or advice they are given. In their minds, God has the final answer and that is what they listen to. It appears that they go to others not for the sake of seeking advice, but to see if they are looking at the problem in a reasonable and rational perspective. If the suggestion or advice validates that there is a problem or a potential problem, then the participant brings it to God in prayer for deliverance and guidance. In most instances, some implied that when confronted with a problem or predicament, what they do is weigh the suggestions and advice and then they pray about it.

What's in a Name?

Prior to the study, introspectively, it was surmised that all participants would identify themselves as being SBWs. The concept was mostly defined by the participants as having the ability to encounter problems and difficulties straight on and to be able to mostly rely on sustaining themselves by using their spirituality.

However, during the individual interviews, Alice said she believes there is no such person as a SBW and she did not consider herself to be one. She declared that anyone, man or woman can be strong in a given situation. The label seemed to bother her as she has known women of other ethnic groups who have exhibited strength. Her mindset is that any woman can be defined as being strong if she uses her wits in order to survive. According to her, using one's wits means that a woman should use whatever is

available for her to use in order to uplift herself from what she would consider her life's atrocities. In other words, having strength, determination, and fortitude is not unique to African American women. She believes that if any African American woman can consider herself to being beyond what society has labeled her, such as a SBW, then that woman can accomplish whatever she needs or wants to. Alice eloquently stated:

I struggle with the idea of being called a strong Black woman. If a woman is willing to sacrifice her own selfish desires and to put the children first, there is going to be a downside to that, no matter what color she is. I don't believe that having special attributes are gender or ethnic specific either. And all of the so called special attributes can be effectively dispensed from more than one type of woman.... Added to the list of women in the child raising arena is the transsexual woman, the lesbian woman and those who are yet to make up their minds. They can do the same things as the so called strong Black woman.

Catherine also did not see any reason to consider herself as being a SBW. She said her upbringing, including the values and beliefs she was taught, did not require her to consider herself as being a SBW. She stated that she was not raised in a critical environment nor was she exposed to difficult times while growing up. Although she has faced traumatic adversities since she has become an adult, she feels she has been able to prevail but does not see this as making her a SBW, but as being a woman who can handle problematic situations well.

The other eight participants each described enduring various types of hardships and struggles throughout their life and attributed overcoming these adversities as the main reason for why they do consider themselves to be SBWs. They attributed their being able to prevail because they had been influenced by other strong women in the family or by influential strong women while growing up. Most watched their mothers and other influential women in their lives, overcome harsh conditions and difficulties and

said they learned from these women's experiences. Along with their spiritual beliefs, the perception of them being SBWs was what kept them motivated and focused in their ability to raise their grandchildren.

The participants believe they must be strong to raise young children at their age. They admit that it is more difficult to raise grandchildren than it was when they were raising their own children, though some were in the same situation then as they are now. On the other hand, they do not proclaim to be SBWs in a conscious manner. With them, endurance, perseverance, and determination bear out. With society's changes, they are surprised that they are able to do as well as they do, living on the Westside, and with limited resources although they do not consider themselves as being poverty stricken. They perceive themselves as being deprived of as much as they would like to have.

The SBW believers perceive the label as a way of simply describing themselves.

As one participant declared:

I may not never call myself a strong Black woman but I know that I am. I come from a long line of strong Black women so I can't help but be one. What I have been through and have come out of in my life is amazing. At least to me it is. If somebody else does not believe that I am one strong Black woman, I dare them to walk in my shoes, back then and now. If I sound like I'm bragging, I am. My mama used to say that it's a poor excuse of a frog who don't praise his own pond.

Parenting the Second Time Around

The participants were asked, "How do you feel about being a parent the second time around and being placed in this position?" Most replied that they did not mind being a parent the second time around and the realization that they were to be custodial grandparents was not shocking to them. Based on their cultural customs, they did expect

that they would be a key influence in the grandchildren's lives. Pat stated she did not ever anticipate or expect to raise her grandchildren. She stated that when her daughter, the children's mother, was living, she overindulged and spoiled her grandchildren not only out of love for them but because she knew that she was sending them home to her daughter and she did not have to bother with them until she saw them again. Now that they are living in her home, it is very difficult for her and the children to differentiate her role change from grandmother to mother. Marie declared:

To be honest with you, I didn't want to do it. I had my ups and downs about it. And it just seemed like it was unfair—unfair because I had already raised mine. And I was angry with her. She put me in that position. She didn't choose to do her responsibility. She took up with what she wanted to do and what she liked to do and it was okay with her. She didn't give a second thought about what would happen with her children. All she cares about is doing drugs.

Most of the participants believe that being mothers the second time around gives them another chance to make up for any perceived mistakes that they might have made while raising their own children. Alice said, "This is like having a second turn at the bat. I am much better prepared to raise a family. Who knows? Maybe I'll get it right this time."

Most of these AACGs admitted their parenting skills are the same as they were when they were raising their own children and most continue to adhere to the way they were raised. In common with African American tradition, many of these AACGs use the authoritative or autocratic method which encompasses the old adage, "Do as I say and don't ask questions." Autocratic methods not questioning a parent's decision or action and instilling fear in children regarding their behavior. It is surmised by many African Americans that slaves raised their children this way and that it was done to accustom them to behaviors that would keep them safe from the beatings, killings, and other acts of

atrocities which the slave parents believed their children would be subjected the rest of their lives.

The participants are learning that this autocratic method does not always work with today's children and the children's behavior causes them a lot of frustration. Some realize that times have changed, yet they have refused to bend with the times because they believe their way is the only way to raise the grandchildren, especially in present times. Most of these AACGs are not interested in taking parenting classes because they do not believe the classes would help them to understand how to raise the children today. In discussing the discipline of their grandchildren, Selma retorted:

Used to be, I would spank my own children when they misbehaved, but not today. The law would be down on you in a New York minute. I used to threaten my kids by telling them that a hard head makes a soft behind or don't let your mouth write a check that your behind can't cover. That would keep them in line for a little while. If I say something like that now, kids will look at you like you were crazy—just daring their mamas to even think about laying a hand on them. That's why kids these days are so tough and disrespectful. But then my grandkids don't give me that kind of trouble.

Behavior Differences in Children and Grandchildren

When the participants were questioned about the behavior of their grandchildren and their parents, most responded that for the most part, there are differences. However, mostly, with the younger grandchildren, the behaviors are much the same as their parents were at their young ages. With a few exceptions, the teenage grandchildren's behaviors are vastly different from those of their parents. These behaviors have caused the grandmothers to step back and see the children in a different light. They have realized that times have changed in terms of the way they raised their own children. As Sarah related:

These children talk back and they seem to know more these days than my children did. They do not accept what I say to them as the all and end all. Now they have to know why and they want to tell me what they think about what I say. It is hard for me to understand that. When my kids were growing up, what I told them may as well have been in the Bible and they didn't question me. Today, it is different.

Marie conveyed:

I have to talk to them or yell and scream. Sometimes I wonder if it is me or them. My patience is shorter 'cause I'm older. I get frustrated sometimes and sometimes I don't know I'm frustrated. But when I feel that I'm wrong, I will apologize. I don't never get too big to apologize. But I will tell them that my opinions and what I say is what counts up in here.

Experiences as Primary Caregiver

Their experiences as primary caregivers have varied. Some participants have had to be the primary caregiver since the child's birth. Another caregiver added a grandchild as an extension to her care giving responsibilities with her own minor children still living in the home. Others suddenly found themselves as the custodial parents following their children's death.

Feelings About the Children's Parents

None of the participants disclosed any ill feelings toward the children's parents. In cases where the parents are still alive, all the participants stated that they believe or hope that the parents will someday take over or resume their parenting responsibilities.

Coping with Issues Involving Grandchildren

They declared that they openly discussed various issues with the grandchildren when they feel they are old enough to understand the subject matter. Again, the fear technique is used in an attempt to deter the children from becoming involved in behaviors

that are considered inappropriate. In speaking with her grandchildren about the effects of drug addiction, Marie uses the children's mother as a prime example of what they do not want to become. She did not believe that using this tactic is detrimental to the children. The children see their mother occasionally. The children are aware that their mother steals their food, their belongings, and money when she is in their home in order to support her drug addiction. They are aware of how she lives.

Maintaining a Sense of Balance

Prayer and taking one day at a time is how most of the participants maintain a sense of balance in their day-to-day responsibilities. When something unexpected comes up, such as being called to the school to handle a pressing situation involving one of the children, the event is handled just as any other problem. Some said they try to quickly while still remaining calm. Some said that they will pray on the way to the school so that they can handle the situation as needed.

Health Issues

Marie prepared food during the interviewing process. She, as with most of the other participants, suffers with hypertension and diabetes. Health maintenance is not a priority. Most of the participants recognize and realize the seriousness of their illnesses but most appear to not be overly concerned with them. Some consider these diseases as hereditary. In other words, having hypertension and diabetes are not necessarily perceived as being caused by improper diet. One participant related a quote she attributed to the late entertainer, Redd Foxx, saying, "We must all die from something. We would look pretty silly laying up in a casket, dead from nothing."

I had read in the literature that African American women tend to take on the problems of the world and internalize them, and as a result, they are burdened with an increase in blood pressure and diabetic maladies. When I related this to Anna, she replied:

Okay, I have high blood pressure and diabetes. You know why? Tho' I said that I try not to let things stress me out, every summer I get so frustrated when I can't get any help. That's what raises my sugar and pressure.

Self-Perceptions

Next to God, all of the grandmothers consider themselves to be the leading character on their life's stage, with the grandchildren playing the lesser roles and the grandchildren's parents playing an even lesser role. These AACGs are aware that times have changed in terms of the way children are raised today as compared to the way they and their own children were raised. They appear to not need nor do they want coaching or other efforts of instruction related to the children's upbringing. They rely on their own wisdom and what they have learned from their life experiences. They use the term "grandmother" but consider themselves to be the "mother" and the major care provider of these children. As in the days of slavery and following, the participants were likely the nucleus of their family units when they were raising their own children and they continue to perform that role.

Most of the participants stated they regretted that they had not acquired substantial education during their lifetime. As young women, they had been told that for African Americans, education and working twice as hard as someone else were the keys to a successful life. They felt that they had ignored these lessons. Some believed that the

men they had married were their stumbling blocks, keeping them from acquiring a better life for themselves. They admitted that had they practiced the lessons learned in their youth, they would have had better lives.

Individually, they described their beliefs as being SBWs. They felt their perseverance and faith and trust in God were the reasons they were able to survive under the direst hardship. Most described life as being a constant struggle, and that being strong means that struggles and difficulties are taken in stride and can be accepted. They felt solutions could always be found without becoming overwhelmed or out of control.

These AACGs residing on the Westside appear able to maintain themselves favorably regardless of the battlements of dangers as well as the apathy of local public officials and public servants including those who work in the social services realm. Although, residents of the surrounding communities ignore them, the participants appear able to sustain themselves by their positive beliefs in themselves and in their ability to raise their grandchildren in the best way that they know how to do. Although these perceptions might not work for all grandmothers raising their grandchildren, each participant in the study believes that the coping mechanisms they use are valuable and useful to them.

CHAPTER 6

PRESENTATION OF DATA—FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Introduction

The focus group discussions portrayed the participants' thoughts, their activities, opinions, and realities as they related to the discussion questions. The discussions describe the dialogue and expressions the participants used in attempting to agree to form a collaborative effort to construct a strengths based supportive group.

Assembling a Focus Group

The questions for the focus group were mainly derived from the individual interviews and represented major points that I needed to follow up from the individual interview questions. Representing new concerns were new questions and other questions where the responses had remained unanswered or unclear during the individual interview process.

I wanted to probe more into other methods or ways the AACGs used for coping. During the individual interviews, most insisted that all they used for coping was their steadfast belief in God. I was able to detect, and follow up participant checks affirmed, that the participants did not want it to seem as if they were denying God His place in their lives and that they were still hesitant to tell me they used other coping mechanisms. It seemed they felt admitting using other coping means would place them in God's disfavor.

I hoped that in a group discussion, if I could get just one AACG to tell about using different coping mechanisms, then the others would become more relaxed in divulging other methods they used. Somehow, I believed that they sought other channels for dealing with their everyday issues, that they had ways of coping and solving problems other than using total dependence on their higher power.

Second, in response to a question that arose during the individual interviews, I wanted to know more about their reasons for not wanting to use local resources such as respite care services, the Kinship Program, or for not seeking other services from the agencies that provide them. I wanted to know what the helping professionals could do to assist them and if the services were more to what they considered favorable utilization, would they be willing to accept the services or consider allowing the helping professionals to help them with their needs. Again, with the exception of one participant, all others had found fault with social service providers and stated that they had no use for them. Most had agreed that if they were younger women, they believed that they would have the stamina to endure the bureaucratic confusion that they previously encountered. As they stated, at this time in their lives, even with raising grandchildren, they had no desire to engage in a bureaucratic process with people who made them feel inferior, or as parasites of society. They considered the social services application process as dreary and confusing.

Third, I wanted to explore what they, in a group setting, considered to be a SBW. I wanted their individual definitions of a SBW, what they thought about being one, and other group members' responses to their individual response to the question. Pertaining to the third original research question, I needed to know as a group, their thoughts about

becoming a womanist as defined for this study. Would they be willing to extend collaborative efforts in order to assist each other when difficulties and problems arise? How willing were they to exploit the past patterns of the slave women by learning to lean on and support each other?

Some of the participants had been single women while raising their own children and they had to confront and solve their problems single handedly or with limited assistance from others. Regardless of the probing during individual interviews, I was unable to actually pinpoint definitive examples of what they had to endure in order to recognize or identify the qualifiers that deemed them as being SBWs. That is, what was it exactly that differentiated them from other women who may have experienced the same difficulties and who were in the same position as they were in terms of their marital status, the number of children they raised, or grandchildren they are currently raising. I wanted to find out what was exceptional about their predicaments. This included my own thoughts on my position as a SBW. I was also unable to account for any major specific instances in point at that time. I believed that in a group setting, they might be reminded of their reasons by comments or responses from the other group members. Also, I believed that I would benefit from this as it applied to me.

In a group setting, I believed I would be able to discern whether or not they could apply the womanist concept to themselves, as a group of women having similar circumstances and living in the same community. I wanted to find out if they were willing to proceed with acting on the womanist concept and if so, how would they proceed to affect a change and what would they expect to be the results of their efforts.

Sisters, Coming Together and Speaking Out

Focus Group Meeting Number One

The first focus group meeting was held at the West Las Vegas Art and Cultural Center (WLVACC). Alice, Martha, Marie, and Pat attended the meeting. The first meeting began by reviewing the purpose of the study and what accomplishments were expected from the focus group sessions. I reminded the participants that the study would give them a forum where they could express themselves and could provide information that would allow others, especially those in the helping professions, to at least have something to think about as they encountered single grandmothers who were raising their grandchildren. The information gathered would help others to know what motivates and drives the grandmothers to do what they do, to identify their needs as the grandmothers perceived them, and what methods they use in coping with their tasks. It would help others to know what strengths they possessed and the basis of their resilience. That way, interventions based on their own assistance and the use of their strengths would probably prove beneficial to them. I discussed the womanist concept by referring back to the story about slave women, their needs and their ability to rely on each other for support, since as history informs us, the nuclear slave family was almost nonexistent and many slave women raised their children without the help of a male.

The discussion began with the SBW concept instead of beginning with the coping mechanism topic. I believed that discussing the SBW concept first was vital to having the participants become relaxed. Immediately, one of the participants, Alice, reminded me what she had told me during her individual interview that she had not considered herself to be a SBW and that African American women did not have a monopoly on

being strong. She inquired about the definition of the word “strong.” Did it mean physically, mentally, and emotionally strong? Martha stated she believed that because of the many struggles, trials, and tribulations African American women have had to endure for centuries, they have had to be strong in order to survive. She believed that the Black community survives today because of SBWs. This opened the dialogue. To answer Alice’s question about the definition of “strong,” Marie defined having strength as:

...knowing how to weather the storm, taking charge. But at the same time, keeping a level head and going about your business and not falling apart at the seams when things go wrong....

A dialogue continued between these three participants. Alice again inferred that many thought only African American women can be strong. The others denied that, and agreed in a collective sense, that the struggles endured by African American women were greater than women of other ethnic groups.

With further probing for an example, most conceded that in a given situation, with one Black woman and one White woman with the same or similar circumstances, the two women will be viewed and treated differently in society by virtue of their skin color. The group continued on to convey that the disparate treatment of Black women is not only at the hands of non-Blacks but can be at the hands of other Blacks who have internalized many of society’s perceptions of the Black woman. Therefore, just being Black is a struggle and most have had to be strong to overcome their obstacles. Alice stated that she could not identify with the concept of struggle. Marie questioned her fervently:

Come on now. You mean to say that you being a Black woman and all and you never had to struggle. You have never had hard times, and you never had to work hard at anything and you were always able not to have somebody say nasty things to you or mistreat you? In other words, your life has been smooth as silk or velvet? Right? Come on.

Alice defended herself and stated she did have problems but that she had always managed to overcome them and that this did not cause her to be any stronger than anyone else. She continued on by commenting about being raised by her grandmother whose mother had been a slave. She said her grandmother was taught by her own mother to be a strong woman. She went on to state that since she has been an adult, the woman that she had perceived, as being the strongest person on earth, was not any stronger than many other women she has known. She said she had been greatly disillusioned.

Another perception was self labeling. If they see themselves as SBWs then that is what they are. All agreed that the SBW concept characterizes how an African American woman perceives herself. The women in the group admitted that they cry and have tender feelings but that they do not readily broadcast their feelings. They do not necessarily let others know that they hurt. Some implied that they do not assume others' problems or burdens. Some of the participants agreed that they do ask God to bless the person with the burdensome problem and will refer that person to God for help. They said they often state, "You ask God to help you and I'll pray for you too."

Researcher's Reflective Expressions

Some of the participants implied they had long struggled with difficulties in their lives and that some events had occurred so many times that the events were no longer considered as struggles. This struggle had become a way of life for them. These participants felt being strong meant being able to struggle and to persevere. Struggling meant fighting adversities with all their might and trying to survive with the least amount of finances, and even basic needs if necessary and that this led to maintaining deep spiritual qualities. I labeled these descriptors as the four S's; *strength*, *struggle*, and *spirituality*, equaled *strong Black woman*.

During this meeting, I found myself struggling to keep peace between Alice and the other participants. This caused me to concentrate less on what was being said. I sensed the others did not believe Alice when she stated she never had to work hard at anything nor had she ever had hard times like the others described. Perhaps it was because of her personality, but every time Alice made a statement, one or more of the other participants would roll their eyes as if to imply what she was saying was unbelievable. I noticed Alice did not object to the tape recorder as she had done during the individual interview and she talked quite freely knowing it was on. During the group discussion, Alice presented an arrogant front and I believed that the other participants sensed it. I imagined that the others put up their guards and viewed Alice with a jaundiced eye. At times I tensed up, hoping I would not have to intervene, to curtail an argument or worse yet, a fight. Would personalities clash here? When I believed I was losing control of the discussion brought on by Alice's comments about depending on God's help, I felt the need to change the topic in order to maintain harmony.

Relating to spirituality, I recalled the many times I have heard and I have said to others, "I will pray for you," or, "You need Jesus." Often the latter phrase is used in a sarcastic manner to explain that the person being spoken to has faults that only Jesus Christ can fix. This is what I believed the others must have thought of Alice when she argued that they depended too much on God. I wondered if she was deliberately seeking a confrontation or even if she was trying to make the others feel inferior because of her eloquent way of speaking. It was very obvious that she articulated her views in a manner that could have been interpreted as a portrait of her believing that she was a superior person as compared to the other group members.

When I spoke to the participants about their attributes, I used the term “we” because I wanted them to know that I, as a Black woman, considered myself as a group member. For instance, I told them that I fully understood that we, myself included, tended not to disclose information about ourselves. However, this is not necessarily true for me. I can be a complainer and sometimes I want the world to know when, where, and how much I hurt. I felt that I needed to say this in order to get the ladies to be open with each other. I also felt as if I was a hypocrite to them.

When one of the participants spoke about how she defined a SBW, I thought to myself how her definition described me. Like her, I recognize a problem or potential problem and rather than falling apart, I leave it alone for awhile by not thinking about it. I come back to it later, think about it, pray about it; repeat the process over and over again until I perceive what I refer to as a cloudy solution. This continues on until a solution becomes clearer and clearer. Therefore, in my mind, this validated me as a SBW. Also, my spirituality paralleled those participants who stated that they pray a lot. This represented an effective way of knowing since some of the strategies they used to manage their life’s circumstances also applied to me.

I wanted them to be able to contact each other if they wanted to, even while the focus group sessions were occurring. I was reluctant to, but I did ask for permission to compile a list of their first names and telephone numbers for exchange among the group members. I was surprised that they allowed me to do this. They stated that their reason for allowing me to do this was that I had given them my name and telephone numbers so they didn’t think they should have a problem in giving theirs.

Our meetings were to be held on Saturdays but we noticed the WLVACC was very noisy on the first day of our meeting so we realized we would have to change the location. During this first session, we were seated outside. The wind was very high and I was beginning to feel cold. As I hesitated to close the discussion, one of the participants seemed to realize my dilemma and suggested that we conclude the meeting. Then to my amazement, another participant suggested that future meetings be held at my home instead of the WLVACC. They expressed genuine concern for my health and welfare, and wanted to make it convenient for me.

Focus Group Meeting Number Two

Six participants attended the second meeting: Alice, Sarah, Martha, Marie, Pat, and Selma. The second focus group meeting commenced with concentration on the AACGs methods of coping. Selma, who had been absent from the first meeting, admonished the group for not having prayer before the meeting: "...y'all know Black folks don't start nothing without having a word in prayer." The group, researcher included, joined hands and poised in a circle, reminiscent of that unbroken and continuous circle referred to in the literature. After the group prayer and with the introduction of coping mechanisms, it seemed difficult for most of the participants to alter their way of thinking without placing their spiritual beliefs first. The researcher suggested they could have resources or methods that they might not realize were coping mechanisms, and asked what they used to avoid or control distress.

As most had discussed in the individual interviews, all except Alice reiterated that they relied on their spirituality as their most favorable means of coping. Some complained they have attempted to discuss their frustrations with fellow church members

or their pastors but that they never received any gratifying responses. They said they were only told to pray. Although it was clear that it was difficult for some to admit, most felt they were unable to rely on their fellow church members or their pastors for assistance.

Alice asked the group if someone asked for assistance should that person merely be told to pray about the problem. Shouldn't it be assumed that the step had already been taken? Wouldn't it be insulting to suggest or to tell someone that prayer will help when the person may have already prayed about their problem? The participants all agreed that the person seeking guidance and direction should be advised of other helpful choices.

Alice related that every person has been equipped with other means to solve problems and overcome adversities. She went on to say that one such method was using one's wits or using common sense:

I hear all of this talk about how we suppose to depend on the Lord to see us through. Now believe me, I pray just as much as the next one. But I also remember that God gave me a mind and other senses to use....

The comments from Alice led to a discussion of the womanist concept and what it meant. The group agreed that it meant to share their strengths with others who are in similar situations. They seemed to understand the womanist definition as I had defined the term to each of them during the individual interviews. They appeared to believe that helping each other, even if only by brainstorming with each other, was an excellent idea. Still, Selma insisted that the only way she could engage with the others in seeking solutions or suggestions was to pray about it first. However, within this discussion, they accepted the idea that since they were all AACGs living similar lives in the same community; that they were probably able to understand each other's problems and

frustrations more than others outside of their situational realm. It seemed this type of camaraderie could lessen the feelings of guilt they acknowledged they sometimes felt with “keeping people I know out of my business.” This was directed to include those church members who offered support but were believed to be insincere in helping but only wanted to know what was happening in the participant’s life.

As I eased further into the subject on other methods of coping, the participants appeared to perceive being defined as womanists, rather than as SBWs, and to use this portrayal as a helping and coping mechanism. As such, they did not worry about exposing their weaknesses or frailties or “telling their business.” Contrastingly, they seemed to perceive the SBW as someone who, alone, is able to fix problems for everybody and still be able to smile and act as if the entire world is fine for them. In other words, nothing ever bothers the SBW. One participant stated:

I think we can be whatever we want to be. We can call ourselves whatever we want to call ourselves. We don’t have to say we are strong Black women. Okay, we can say we are womanists, but who we think we are is what we believe and say we are and how we look at ourselves to be.

Sarah stated that to feel good about herself and to overcome the distress that she sometimes encounters, she dresses up in her finest, treats herself to a movie and dinner at a nice restaurant, all alone. She is the participant who stated in the individual interview that she relied totally upon her fellow church members and her pastor for assistance when she felt overwhelmed. When she freely admitted this different way of coping with distress during the discussion, she appeared to act as though she was betraying God by performing worldly activities such as going out to a movie and dinner. Martha then related:

Y'all know what I do when I feel down and out and want to get away from it all? I find myself a quiet spot and crochet and hum spirituals late at night when the house is quiet. Sometimes I plan all day to do this. I feel so much better the next day. I may even read novel. Sometimes, I read one of those sexy novels.

Alice was asked what she did:

Me? I like to turn out all the lights and sit in the dark and reminisce about the good old days when I was traveling around with the groups, enjoying myself, having a ball. But then, I am blessed that I don't have those types of problems where I need to spend a lot of time trying to cope. My girls do not give me problems. I have been celibate for over 30 years. Yeah, I gave it all up then. When I used to go from bed to bed....

These comments from Alice led to an emerging theme: *Sex and Men*. Sarah commented:

Chile, there ain't nothing out there for us but old worn out pieces of nothing. All they want is someone to take care of them and to nurse their old sickly behinds. I ain't got time for that. I got enough on my hands trying to raise the two teenage men I have in my house now.

Marie stated:

Those old heads that I know now act the same way they did when we was young. When I knew them. I saw one the other day and he started talking his old trash. I told him that I did not want him when he was a young man. Why would I want anything to do with him now?

Pat appeared embarrassed by the new topic and in an attempt to get back on the subject of coping, talked about visiting the gravesite. She said she spends time talking to the children's mother, telling how she is trying to keep the promise she made to keep the children together and to take care of them. She talks to her daughter as if she is listening:

I talk to her about how hard it is for me sometimes, but I have to keep on going. I tell her that if she sees her daddy up there, to tell him that I miss him. But I know that God knew what He was doing when He took her daddy and her away from me.

Pat went on to say that at other times, she goes out to play bingo but not too often because of the cost and she emphasized that she is not a gambling woman. She said she

goes to relax and to enjoy being around other people for a while. She wanted the group members to know that she definitely was not a gambler.

Marie related how she coped when she found an empty condom wrapper in her grandson's bedroom one day when he was not at home. She remained calm and did not mention the incident to the child. She visited the public library and located books on explaining sex to young boys. After reading up on the topic, she felt ready to have a discussion with her grandson and she did. She described how she felt overwhelmed as she knew how difficult it is for a woman to raise a male child alone. Yet, she realized that this was something only she could do.

Alice exclaimed again that she has never had any of the problems the others were describing. She insisted that she has always been able to handle any potential problem:

Yes, I do pray for guidance sometimes and not just when I think that there might be a problem coming on. But like I said before, I use my own brains and my wits to get some sort of relief.

She went on to relate how she maintains extreme closeness to her granddaughters. They do not spend a lot of time away from her and do not associate with other children their age. Other participants questioned the closeness and said it may be attributed to a fear of losing their grandmother since they lost their own mother by an accidental death. Alice denied this, saying she thought this was not the case.

The participants began to talk about how much freedom children needed and should have, and the children's behavior became a topic of discussion. It began when Alice explained what she meant by using her wits to overcome stressors or problems:

I use common sense. If I recognize that something could be a problem with one or both of the girls, I try to come up with how to solve it before it becomes a big problem. I guess, in a sense, I can see something coming

before it happens. I can easily pick up on a little problem before it gets to become a big problem.

Most of the other participants indicated as they are older now, the problems with their grandchildren appear to be greater and harder to solve than the problems they had with their own children. They believed this could be caused not only by the changing times but also by their not having the patience and ability to think as fast as the grandchildren. They surmised that the children today are more intelligent. They inferred to the general idea that children must be protected, but that things are different now. The grandmothers must be different too. They agreed that they have to open their minds to new solutions and that they must provide the children with alternatives to the bad elements in their communities.

These AACGs realize they might not perceive a situation as problematic as others in society may do. One participant gave fighting as an example. In many African American families, children are taught to not initiate a fight but if someone initiating a fight confronts the child, the child is taught to “knock the hell of ‘em.” Others might offer a solution such as reporting it to an adult or simply walking away from an argument as opposed to engaging in one. I can remember being taught if someone struck me and I did not strike back, then I was threatened by my parents that I could expect repercussions from them in the manner of a “whooping.” I was told, “If I hear that you did not defend yourself and did not try to whoop them, I will whoop you. Or, “If you see a good fight, jump in it -and win.” Growing up in my family, if someone fought with me, that person had a battle with my three siblings too—and to think that we children were all devoted Sunday school students and church goers. The participants suggested they should open their minds to a different way of thinking but that this could be a difficult task.

Further discussion of the children's behavior led to a discussion of how the children of today expect their parents to be their friends. The participants attributed this to the immersion and assimilation into today's society with children of other cultures and ethnic groups. This was not stated, but was an inference to the concept of racial integration and was an example of a need to "scratch the surface," to explore what it was they were actually saying. The AACGs remembered times, as not being so long ago when young Black girls did not expose any portion of their bare bodies in public unless the girls were attired in what they would consider appropriate swimwear or shorts.

....on some of those ole videos you see, we would not have even dared. Dancing around, half naked or just plain naked, and all that; using all kinds of filthy language. They have no respect for themselves or nobody else. My mother used to tell me that a woman should always have some kind of mystery about her. In other words, don't let it all hang out for everybody and his brother to see. But parents today will let their children do anything.

I commented that young girls of other racial and ethnic groups had probably been taught the same thing. There must have been a time when other young girls did not expose their bodies either. I went on to say that in the past, the way many African Americans behaved and learned modesty was learned from other ethnic groups. I quickly changed the subject as I did not want to appear argumentative. As an example of role confusion, the AACGs acknowledged that many of today's parents and not the children's peers were their friends. Selma commented, "You cannot be mama and friend to your son or daughter or to your grandson or granddaughter. It will not work." Pat added her comments:

A lot of these young mothers you see today are so pitiful. Every week they bring in some strange man to live with them over their children. That's why the children don't have any respect for their mothers. Every week it's a different daddy. More likely, he is hanging out with her to

take her money and eat up all the children's food. Then he is off to live with the next fool. Do they need a man that bad where they take up with any old Sam and still be in just a bad a shape as she was without him living in her house over her children? You can catch hell by yourself.

Martha responded to Pat:

Well I lived with a man for four years after I left my husband. I had children too. I married him later on. He was good to me and my children. He respected me and he was a hard worker. He brought all of his money home for me to take care of the bills and things. So sometimes a woman have to do what she have to do.

Selma added:

What I'm saying is that a woman don't need to let some old Joe Blow take advantage of her. I remember very well what Mama told me. Don't ever depend on nobody but you and the Lord. The Lord first, then you.

The participants continued to discuss how some women do not set out to depend on someone other than themselves, including their thought concerning how some unmarried women might want a man in her life for companionship and as a sex partner. They discussed how a woman may not care if the man does or does not do anything to help her. Some women are aware of how to care for themselves and their children and know what they need to do to maintain their families. These women don't necessarily rely on a man for support but merely want a man in their lives to fulfill that sexual void. One participant stated, "Some women and I guess that could include us grandmothers, want a man in their lives just to say I got a man." Another participant responded, "Yeah. And they really don't have a man. What they do have is another child to raise."

Researcher's Reflective Expressions

Before any group meetings or gatherings commence, many African Americans believe in the ritual of forming a circle, holding hands and saying a prayer in unison or being led in prayer by a member of the group. This circular order produces a

cosmological effect, implying that we are all connected. I had forgotten this. I had to apologize for not recognizing or remembering this and I wanted to ask the participants about their feelings for the practice. However, before I could begin, the others stood up and joined hands immediately following Selma's admonishment. I felt as if I was being pushed aside and that Selma, the prayer leader, was taking over the meeting. I wanted to push back and exert my leadership role but I did not want to antagonize the members. I felt as if the group thought I had been remiss in neglecting this ritual.

When Selma spoke about forming the circle and praying, I wondered what the group members thought about her. Did they think the same of her as I thought they must have thought of Alice at the first group meeting? Alice had been arrogant and superior acting. Did they think that Selma considered herself to be more spiritual than the others since she had described herself as an evangelist? Within the group, did this title give her reason to believe that she had the closest avenue to God? She appeared to be very pompous about her spirituality. Perhaps she believed that God loved her more than He did the others.

I had a problem believing that, as most of the participants stated, when a problem or need for a solution arises, the first thing they do is to pray. Maybe they forgot that the first thing they probably do is to try to figure out a solution or think about trying to find a solution and then pray. Alice consistently suggested using one's own wits or common sense to solve problems rather than praying about it. I wondered if she thought that the others were too lazy to think for themselves or that by them praying and waiting for an answer was the easiest thing to do.

When they began to speaking of men and sex, they appeared to become more relaxed and more interested in this emergent theme. Most did not have good things to say about the men with whom they have had relationships. I think that they may not have been aware that they may be lonely for companionship.

Like me, I could tell that the others appeared not to believe Alice when she said that she home schooled her granddaughters. Could the girls be overly attached to their grandmother? I silently questioned whether or not they were actually learning anything from Alice other than about her life as a 60's groupie. As for the granddaughters being overly attached to Alice, I did agree with her comments regarding her assessment of a problem. If she does not see something as a problem, then it is not a problem. Why should she or I care whether or not others believed that she might not perceive a problem, as being a problem or something might become a problem? On the other hand, I could not imagine what messages she sends to her granddaughters.

Not one participant, myself included, admitted believing that the underlying reason for the differences in the way we were raised and the way today's children are raised is integration into mainstream society. I did not feel comfortable with opening up what I would describe as a "Pandora's box," or to try to "scratch the surface." Later, I felt that I should have been able to do this. After all, I am a Black woman like them, and most of us belong to the same generation. Why didn't I feel comfortable and why was I so apprehensive about discussing subjects with racial overtones? Apparently, the participants were uncomfortable too, although they glared at me when I stated that in previous generations, young Black girls were not the only ones who were taught not to expose their bodies. They appeared to feel quite comfortable discussing men and sex but

not their reasons for believing why the behaviors of African American children have greatly changed from those of our generation. I struggled with why I was not able to open the topic for further discussion. I might have discovered that the reasons they do not readily seek assistance from social service agencies are embedded in their beliefs that people in the helping professions are biased because of their ethnicity and social standing.

Alice continued to brag about her 30 years of celibacy. I was being unkind in thinking to myself that she did enough before those 30 years to last a lifetime for all of us gathered in the room. She said that she never had to struggle because she was able to live by her wits. She never explicitly defined what she meant by that term. I believed that living by one's wits, especially in her case, must have been a struggle. I wondered if she had enough insight to realize how degrading it must have been, having nothing but sex to give in exchange, to the men that "helped" her. On the other hand, this was probably all the men wanted from her. She spoke as if she enjoyed what she did and believed that she was being clever in her actions. I believed that I offended her by asking questions about her past and I apologized. She assured me that I had not offended her. During this time, the participants gave her their undivided attention as they sat on the edge of their seats as she told her stories. I thought to myself, what a bunch of dirty minded old broads, myself included.

I felt better towards the end of the meeting when one participant stated that we should appreciate being able to feel comfortable with each other and to be able to discuss such intimate aspects of our lives. They seemed to not condemn each other for the actions they took concerning their lives. I thought about the slave women who supported

each other. The participants might be able to bear each other's cross. It seemed as if they were able to openly relate to each other.

Alice disliked the SBW term and might have a problem with the concept, "Black" (scratch the surface). She is a mulatto and is the product of a generation that did not espouse, "Black is beautiful." This is a metaphoric term from the 70's that sets aside the thought that dark toned skin is not appreciated. The phrase also replaces the poem or song many African Americans heard and learned prior to the 70's which relates to African American skin tones: *"If you're light (light skinned), you're all right. If you're brown (like me), stick around. If you're Black (very dark skinned), get back."* This measured and segregated African Americans from the high end or most favorable skin tones (light skinned), to the acceptable brown tones, to the least favored, or unacceptable very dark skin tones. Maybe I was the only one with a problem. It appeared I was the only one who, in a subconscious way, was judging Alice. I felt guilty.

There were quite a few intense discussions that I had to diffuse during this session. I did this by changing the subject matter with, "Let's cool off by talking about something else." Still tension existed for a few minutes after each heated discussion.

I believed the participants were right. Assimilation has had its advantages and disadvantages. A good advantage is that African Americans have accessibility to more of society's advantages. The downside is that in order to acquire the advantages, many African Americans may have lost a lot of the belief systems of their cultural background, that is specifically referring that the grandchildren might have. For instance, one participant talked about her young niece telling her mother she hated her when she was not allowed to go outside to play. As the other participants related, they would never

have had the nerve to say that—I felt the same way. I might have thought it, but I never would have said it aloud.

Focus Group Meeting Number Three

Alice, Martha, Marie, Pat, and Selma were present. Sarah was absent for this third meeting. I opened the discussion with the story about Channel 12 News featuring me when I visited the new apartments advertised for grandparents who were the sole providers and caregivers for grandchildren living in their homes. Representatives from a television station were there for the grand opening. I told the participants I was surprised to learn not one grandparent-headed family had moved in nor were there any families on a waiting list and asked them why they thought this was so.

They replied that moving to a perceivably nicer apartment or house in the same community was not any safer than their present habitation. Rather, if they considered moving, they would want to move completely out of the community. Located in the same community, the new apartments did not diminish the dangers the participants faced in their present homes—there will be the same gangland activities, including drive by shootings, the same drug dealing activities, as well as the other violent and illegal activities they now face.

Some of the participants also gave another reason, stating that they learned there were restrictions that disturbed them and that these restrictions were strictly enforced. One restriction was that residency was for only the grandparents and the grandchildren in their care. This monitored rule applied to any overnight stay for extended family members, friends, and those related or not related who come to visit. This rule also applied to those from other states needing a place to live temporarily while looking for

work and establishing their own residence. Most of the participants and their families had migrated to the area from the South. Selma summed it up for the group:

Well, I know one thing—I don't want to live somewhere where they are always watching like buzzards waiting to pounce. I might have a relative from down South who comes here to stay for a while. Y'all know how that is. When we have kinfolks who come from down South looking for a better life, we take them in and let them stay with us until they get on their feet. That's how we came here, most of us, I guess. If we lived over there we couldn't do that. No way. That is not for me or anyone else who has any sense.

Marie added her comments:

I have a brother who comes to live with me now and then when he is between girlfriends. I don't mind. After all, he is family. I imagine that we all have family members or someone we know like that. My granddaughter will be 18 years old next year. Where is she suppose to go? I would have to kick her out.

Another of the apartment complex's requirements is that grandparents must be at least 62 years old to live there. Today's grandparents are getting younger. I was a grandmother at age 38. One participant said, "By the time I am 62, most of my grandchildren will be grown or close to it." In addition, the participants believed that they and other community residents did not have a voice in the decision making about putting the federally-sponsored Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funded apartment complex in their community. One participant related:

Come to think of it, I don't remember hearing about nobody coming around asking us or anyone else for that matter, if we wanted it or needed it. And if they built it, would we move there. On the other hand, who ever asks us anything? They just put it there and expect us to jump up and holler 'whoopie.' They can keep it for all I care.

This led to a discussion about engaging with social service agencies' providers. It was stated that social service agencies are generally not set up to allow grandmothers to help themselves. They believe agencies are set up strictly to make people dependent

upon them. When asked to explain, Marie iterated that to receive assistance, a family must be impaired or dysfunctional in some way. There must be something wrong with the grandchildren or the grandmothers or both. She maintained, “Then they figure that they must be the ones and the only ones that can make our families so called normal to suit them.”

It was suggested that the policies of the programs should reflect younger grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. Pat said, “It is just like that state program they have. Like that foster parent program where they give you money for keeping the grandchildren.” She was referring to the Kinship Care Program whose policy reflects that the custodial grandparent must be 62 years old and have legal custody of the grandchild in order to participate in the program. Both of these regulations make some grandparents ineligible to participate in the Kinship Program. Some of the participants declared that they do not seek legal guardianship because they do not want to appear to sever the children’s ties to their biological parents.

The participants described feelings of inferiority when they engage with the personnel of some social service agencies. Marie stated, “Their attitudes.... They act like whenever I want help, with me being there, interferes with what they are doing and I am intruding on their time. And whatever they have to offer me, they own it.” I asked the participants if they would be willing to accept assistance if offered via some of the new intervention strategies being developed. I was admonished for using the term “intervention.” Alice specifically alluded:

I hate that term.... I am a grown woman. How dare they suggest their so called interventions to me. It makes me feel that I am in deep trouble, and they, on my behalf, will come to this poor helpless woman’s rescue and solve whatever is ailing me or causing me misery.

I thought Alice was speaking directly to me. When asked if they would accept help if the helping professionals would consider including them in the intervention process, Martha stated:

It don't make no difference. From what I understand, people on parole or probation have interventions that include them. But I imagine that it is still punishment for them to have somebody always standing by, just in case. I have not done anything to be punished for.

I explained that the term "intervention," as it would apply to them was just another word for helping and then gave an example of respite care services. To assist AACGs, some helping professionals believe that they need respite. For those who have younger grandchildren, they might need someone to look after the children while they take a break, run errands, or go for a medical appointment. Marie retorted:

Well, say you are trying to help me. You might first ask me what do I want or need and if I would be willing to accept what you say.... Don't assume that I am a victim and here you are, 'O Great One,' ready to rescue me. I am not a child in need of protection. That is so wrong. Those people don't know me from Adam. But they feel that they can come into my life and take over. If I want your benefits or what you have to offer, I don't expect to let you take over my life in order for me to get them.

Explaining her feelings, Selma stated:

It might help if they would try to get to know me. Think about how I feel. Let me get to know them too. But they can't lead me. I don't want you leading me. I can lead myself. Take an interest in me as a person, not just by my problem or my situation. Come with me, not lead me to solving my own problem. I don't need that band-aid type of help where you do just enough for temporary get-bys. If I am looking for help, it just might be for a deep problem. That's why I go to the Lord instead of social services. He knows what He is doing. He is the only one I trust.

The participants expressed feelings of defeat and intimidation when relating to the helping providers. Some also believed that helping professionals, as a whole, seek reasons to deny services. However, Alice admitted that regardless of her feelings toward

those who work in the helping professions, she eagerly seeks out resources for help and patiently complies with what she must do in order to receive help. She described the many benefits that she receives metaphorically as collecting her “forty acres and a mule.” This referred to the government’s promise to the slaves after they were freed; however, they never received them. Explaining further, she said:

After all, I am somebody’s daughter too. My mother worked for years and died before she could reap benefits she was entitled to. I am a daughter who is trying to replace my own daughter in her children’s lives and do what’s right by them. If it wasn’t for me, the State would have to take care of them. So I am really doing them a favor.

Speaking of the dead led to comments from Pat whose deceased daughter was the mother of her grandchildren. She expressed regret and concern that she believed the older children had not fully grieved the loss of their mother.

I still haven’t finished my grief over my husband, my daughter, or my mother. But I can handle mine. I worry about the children and how they won’t let it out. With the girls especially, I feel that they want to cry but they shut down when they think that I sense that.

Continuing, Pat added that she has difficulty with her role change. Her comments are an example of an African American woman who has discovered that role change can be complicated.

You know how it is. When you are just the grandmother, you spoil them and let them get away with so much. Now, since I have become their mother, things have changed. I don’t allow them to get away with much. I don’t spoil them like I used to. I know that this is confusing to them. It’s confusing to me too.

Some of the participants believe that at some point, the mothers of their grandchildren will try to enter into their lives again and resume parenthood. One expressed her feelings:

Sometimes I worry about my daughter coming back home to stay. How can I refuse her? The children might find out if I did. But I can't have that stuff around the children or me. She wouldn't care. That's why I never tried to get legal guardianship. I don't want her or them to think that she is forever cut off from them. After all, she is their mother and they know that she is their mother.

Marie offered her perception:

I get tired of my daughter coming around when she knows I am not at home. She steals from me and the children. It hurts me so bad because I did not raise her that way.

When asked if she blamed herself because her daughter lives as a drug addict, Marie answered:

I used to but I stopped. My other children are not like her and I raised them all the same way. Like I told her, I could only bring you so far.... But when she got out in the world, seems like she forgot what I taught her.... All I can do is continue to pray for her. I turned her over to God long time ago. After I pray for her, I try to forget about it.

The group focused on the subject of the violence in their community. They described the drive bys and how innocent children and others, including one participant's husband, have been killed, sometimes merely being in the wrong place at the wrong time. They expressed their fears and concern. They appeared to be oblivious of whom to take their complaints to, as if they were they waiting for someone else to do it because they are fearful of repercussions.

When I get out of my car, I am praying from the car to the house for the Lord to let me get in there and shut my door. I can't walk fast enough from the driveway to the house and I am looking all around me. I am so scared for me or the children to take the trash out to the curb. Now that's bad. We try to take it out way early in the morning before folks get to moving around.

However, although scared, some favor familiarity with the community and its members.

It's like living in a jungle. Every day you have to fight for your life. Still, if it wasn't for the riff raff, I would enjoy living there because I know

everybody—have known them for years. In that neighborhood, we know our neighbors, not like some communities I hear about, where you can live next door to each other for years and never know each other's name.

The participants were reminded that violence is city wide although it may be concentrated more in their community. They agreed and recalled that recently, violence, especially gang violence, rape, and murder, have been occurring in Summerlin, as well as other communities in the city. Summerlin is an upscale, upper class, and upper middle class community in Northwest Las Vegas.

Yeah. They have all kinds of gangs up there. The Mexican gangs, the Asian gangs, the rich kids gangs, everybody. Down here in the jungle, we only have to worry about the Black gangs and we have been dealing with them longer.

One participant lamented:

This world is going to hell isn't it? One thing about it, these days it doesn't matter what zip code you live in, does it? All hell used to be only on the Westside. Now it's all over Las Vegas. It makes me feel I am not the red-headed stepchild of the city, living where I am.

Referring to not being the “red-headed stepchild,” she meant that she did not feel as though she was an unusual person or that crime on the Westside was not unusual for Las Vegas. Other than living in a crime-infested area, with the exception of physically living on the Westside, she was just like any other person living in the city. The Westside was the same as any community relative to crimes committed.

Researcher's Reflective Expressions.

The group discussed their dislike of following bureaucratic rules and regulations. This seemed to be a conflicting feeling as they all had previously talked about repeatedly telling their grandchildren how life is about following rules, regulations, and the law.

This type of thought can be interpreted as a “do as I say, not as I do,” and can be perceived as being hypocritical.

Although I discussed in depth with the participants about how people in the helping professions might possibly help them, I had to question myself. Did I really expect those in the helping professions to engage with them as I had done? I thought about public funded agencies that must follow strict policy procedures. Because of heavy caseloads, caseworkers would not have the time to engage in intensive interactions. I believed the participants knew this too. Do many social service workers really care whether or not their clients trust them or not? Do they have time to care?

I again had feelings of losing control of the group as one participant after the other led with topics not related to or out of the range of the current discussion. One example was bringing up the subject of the need for policy change in the Kinship Care Program. I did not believe that the participants realized how much work that would entail. When I offered the suggestion that it might be feasible for them to attempt to change the program’s policy, they all became silent and looked at me as if to suggest they wanted to move on to another topic. Now they relinquished their control of the discussion. I felt defeated and thought to myself, “You brought it up, now move to do something about it.” I thought that they were all about talk and no action—“talking loud and saying nothing.”

We all agreed that their voices have not been heard in their community, with any community programs, or with any of the local agencies. I questioned whether or not they really wanted to be heard. Why hadn’t they moved on to being heard before? The participants adamantly expressed their feelings about providers at social service agencies

telling them when, what, and how to do something. They did not believe that the providers would ever be willing to sit down with them and try to learn about them as persons. I agreed with their assessment that many social service agencies were oblivious to the needs of AACGs. As a Black woman, I could relate to their feelings of defeat, intimidation, not having a voice; being ignored, not even being allowed to complete a sentence that I had started. I could also relate to being made to feel as if they have nothing important to say, and being rudely brushed aside. I have had feelings of being perceived as inadequate; not being a person, certainly not being a person who warranted being heard or listened to. Pat had insight in being aware that her grandchildren have been unable to openly grieve over the loss of their mother. I feel she has not fully grieved over her own losses either.

I was very surprised to hear that two of the participants had problems with their role change from noncustodial grandmother to full time AACG. According to the literature and cultural history, this should have been an easy task.

They might not have admitted it during the session, but I could tell that in the instances where the biological parent was on drugs, those participants were afraid to allow the parents in their homes for fear the parent would steal what little they and the children have. I feared with them as I have a relative on drugs that I am afraid to allow into my home. Other fears I sensed from the participants during the discussions were related to random or nonrandom drive by shootings. I had put up a brave front but I also had been afraid when I visited the Westside. I had been afraid to visit them in their homes. Even as I drove to and from their homes and to and from the WLVAACC, I was afraid. I remember how scared I was when I first attempted to recruit interviewees while

I stood in front of Mario's Market on Saturday mornings. I encountered several types of deviants, drug addicts, buyers, and sellers, panhandlers, and gang members wearing their colors and giving their signs. I had used my fear as an excuse to recruit at the WLVACC, which is still located on the Westside, but in what I considered to be a less public and safer area at the time of day I was there.

As I told this story to the participants, they nodded their heads as a sign of understanding my feelings. Later, I wondered if they had thought that I was a meek minded person who did not have the courage to endure moving about in their community. This was something that they did on a daily basis. I wondered if they thought that I was relieved I did not have to travel about their community as often as they did. Guilt feelings encompassed me again. How dare I talk about their community. If any unfavorable thoughts were expressed about their community, they should be the ones to do so and not I. They seemed to rejoice in the fact that gang related and other crimes were presently occurring in the "upperclass" communities. Does misery love company?

Focus Group Meeting Number Four—The Finale

All six original members were present. The final focus group discussions were a recap of the previous group discussions and also a social function that was planned at the previous meeting. Each participant brought a dish and the researcher provided beverages.

According to the literature, there is a skipped generation of parents. The participants were asked for an opinion related to these absent grandmothers—the likelihood that there will be a skipped generation of grandparents, the parents of the present grandchildren. The question was what will happen to those future grandchildren, the children of the grandchildren now being raised? One participant responded that if she

is able to raise the children to be what she would consider to be successful, God-fearing, and good citizens, she would then regard herself as having done a good job. Her grandchildren would not need a custodial grandmother to raise their children. She remarked that she did not believe her daughter, the children's mother, would be able to the job she is doing.

In discussing the womanist concept, the participants agreed that they believed they could act in the manner of a womanist, meaning they could collaborate to form a womanist group. One participant stated that being a womanist or a SBW still meant she was a strong and resilient woman who knows how to survive. The implication was that the SBW concept was not to be discarded or totally replaced and that they perceived the womanist concept as an appendage of the SBW. A womanist will remain strong and resilient, offer help, and be willing to accept help if she needed it. Both concepts allow the use of coping and survival mechanisms and the opportunity to simultaneously exert strength and spirituality. The participants believed themselves to be necessary in doing the job of being mothers to their grandchildren. As one participant stated, "We have survived and will continue to survive. No doubt about it. We will always be strong Black women. Those of us who believe we are." (Was this a comment directed at Alice?). We have to keep our futures going. We need to keep our families going."

They declared that they live their lives according to the knowledge, experiences, and influences passed on to them from members of earlier generations. Now they are trying to pass the information on to their grandchildren. They believe that those who came before them faced and prevailed over the struggles that life and society placed

before them. They were thankful that their grandchildren might not have to endure the same. They believe that they are capable of preparing the children for any hardships.

Just because some of us had some bad circumstances in our lives that we couldn't do nothing about, we shouldn't allow ourselves to cut back on what we want or what we expect for these children. Some of us might not be highly educated or have any prizes for what we do, but in our hearts, and, of course, with the help of the Lord, we are able to keep on facing the trials and tribulations—thank you, Jesus. Even tho' we might have failed or think we did with our own children, we can still face what we have to, shake it off, and keep on gettin' up and keep on keepin' on.

The participants were asked if they would be willing to learn and share new coping skills. They suggested they did not believe coping skills could be taught. A participant metaphorically alluded that she thought social service agencies rely on trying to place the “same shoe on all feet,” and felt that learning new coping skills would “amount to the same thing.” The same participant suggested a different perception, such as looking at what someone else in a similar situation with a similar problem is doing and try that method to see if it will work for her. “...and how do we find out what the other person is doing? We share information with each other. Now I think I finally understand what this womanist thing is all about.” In order to share with each other, they would have to be willing to unveil information about themselves. They would have to come out of the notion that they do not want others “knowing my business.” (There were no comments or responses to this part of the discussion). When asked their feelings about it, one participant jokingly stated that they probably would have to really pray about this and the others nodded in agreement. Looking for an alternative response, I suggested experimenting with a “what if” they were willing to expose their feelings by sharing their problems or troubles with another in the group, and “what if” they all agreed to interact

positively with each other, as they seem to be currently doing. The questions were “what if,” how would they do it, and what would they do?

One participant suggested getting other AACGs in the community to participate. Being able to bring in more AACGs would give them an advantage of having more people from which to choose to share information. Two or three other participants disagreed by stating that they would be comfortable with the present group of participants as they already knew each other and had already personally interacted with each other. I reminded them that I had asked each of them to help me recruit other AACGs in the community and most had been unable to do so and that I had problems recruiting on my own. I expressed how fortunate I had been, that I was able to recruit them. A participant offered a reason for that as being that they were asked to participate only on behalf of the researcher. If they were to involve more AACGs, they would be doing the recruiting themselves and for themselves. This might prove to be difficult because of her belief of others being suspicious, skeptical, and untrusting of the group’s purpose. Another participant added, “Well, most of us, even here, know each other, or we have least seen each other at some time.” She pointed to another participant, “I have seen you. I didn’t know your name but I think I saw you at some church one time. I have seen all of you somewhere before.” Another participant recommended that by starting up as a group and adding to their numbers, they could think about getting the other community members to understand their purpose and to perceive them as a group with a purpose. That is a purpose of trying to help themselves and their grandchildren. A participant exclaimed, “We are somebody too.”

I thought I had opened the door but had gone about it in a reverse way to get them to think about forming a womanist group. I thought that if I kept pushing, I could get them to fully agree and proceed with the idea. I was elated. As if she could read my mind, one participant stated that the group members could get together and develop a plan and proceed from there. “We have sense and brains too. We can think for ourselves. The good Lord gave us sense and brains just like He gave everybody else.” Was this an insinuation that the researcher was not invited to participate? The participant let me know that she was not shutting me out and she thanked me for “planting the seed,” but implied that the participants present should be treated as the adults they were. She stated that they should be able to proceed on their own. Others nodded in agreement, although I sensed they might have been reluctant to allow me to know they agreed. Another participant attempted to soften the comments by saying, “What’s that song by Frank Sinatra? *I Did It My Way*? Well, we really need to do it our way, if we decide to do this.” I confirmed what they said and asked if they meant they were going to at least begin to think about continuing their group. They all agreed to do this and I pressed the point by asking what if, at some point, they find they might need some type of assistance. The response I received was that they should be able to figure that out too, on their own.

Researcher’s Reflective Expressions

This was the last focus group session. All participants appeared to be uplifted. I could see they believed my appreciation speech was genuine. Some of the participants felt the need to apologize for their actions or statements made in the three previous sessions. Selma was particularly apologetic for some of her comments, saying “I hope that I didn’t come off like I was preaching to y’all.” However, I believed she was firm in

an attitude that she did not care whether or not she was perceived as being offensive or not.

When I asked if they had thought about wanting to learn new coping skills, I recognized tension. There was silence. I did what I called ‘preaching a sermon’ and expressing my feelings regarding engaging with others when I felt I needed help with problems. I was actually trying to get their sympathy, hoping that they would include me in their efforts:

...but if I am a grandmother who is raising my grandkids or anybody else who knows people in the same predicament as I’m in, I believe that I would want or need someone right there to listen to me and for me to listen to them. I would need someone who could reach out and touch what I am feeling. That other person may not even have a solution, but there is an ear that can hear me....

Maybe I wanted them to see that I was not beyond seeking help or opening up to them and appreciating their support. I desperately wanted them to feel the same way about me.

During the discussions, when the participants appeared to be unsure whether or not they wanted to engage and interact with each other in a group effort, I went a step further, and in a backward way, asked a “what if” question. I used what is referred to as “entering in through the back door” or reverse psychology. I wondered if the participants thought I was being manipulative. Maybe I was. When Alice began to explain how it could be done, I realized that she and not I, was setting the stage for their agreeing to participate but I don’t think that she or the other participants realized it. The suggestions flowed.

I could see that they would view the womanist concept as an appendage of the SBW. A short example of the difference is the SBW does not necessarily seek help but is willing to help others. The womanist is willing to help others and is willing to accept

help for herself. When Marie stated that they could develop a plan and go from there, I felt as if she had read my mind as I had been thinking along those lines but I felt her “we” did not include “me.” I was correct and I felt betrayed. I felt that I had to return to the position as researcher only and I did not want to. I believed that the participants thought that I was insulting the group’s collective intelligence by questioning their future plans. I wondered if they thought I was suggesting they needed my help to get them organized and started on a plan. I wanted to tell them not to hesitate in letting me know if I could assist them in any way, but I did not have the courage to even suggest that. I did state to them that if they find they need assistance at some future time, to let me know. One participant glared at me. I felt that I had been politely pushed to an outsider role and I was very disappointed. I had believed I had endeared myself to the group but I had forgotten my true role. I felt that I had overstepped the boundaries.

Ending the focus group sessions was like ending the close of a day. In my mind, the most eloquent statement was made by Martha when she stated, in part, that she felt enriched by the group’s interaction process and the thought of being able to do what seems to come natural with many African American women—that is, moving forward with the act of sharing, caring, and helping.

Focus Group Summary

The past times mentioned by the participants were closer to the basic tenets of an afrocentric culture than what they are today. The participants alluded to those principles as being more removed today. They believe they have assimilated more into mainstream society. Because of this, the participants believed that they, along with many African Americans, have departed from many of their unique cultural values and beliefs.

Therefore, in their attempt to pass along their learning experiences, cultural values, and beliefs to their grandchildren, they think that the children they are raising may not appreciate their efforts. They believe that the grandchildren, as African Americans, do not appreciate the stamina, fortitude, and struggles that the grandmothers and others endured. They believe that the grandchildren do not appreciate the strides that have been made since then, in their behalf. They were not sure if the progress society has made, such as believing in equal opportunities for all, is necessarily beneficial to the grandchildren's future. They perceived equal opportunity as a good thing if the concept actually meant what it implied. Because of this concept, they believe their grandchildren will grow up believing they will have all the opportunities to advance in life if they proceed on the right course of action. Their view is that this belief projects false hope and, therefore, that it will not benefit the grandchildren. During one interview, a participant exclaimed, "We always knew where we stood in this world, and we got exactly what we expected most of the time. Nowadays, they dangle the meat in front of you and then snatch it back as soon as you go to bite it."

Their awareness of living on the Westside means that they are perceived as a particular class of people located on the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder, and that they are unable to advance higher. Most have lived in the area for so long that they are not sure that they would want to advance from the community. They are also aware of how local society views residents of the Westside. They have learned to cope with the negative features such as gang activities, drug activities, prostitution, pandering, and other dangerous elements. In some respect, they do not perceive the Westside as being a totally difficult place to raise the children. Living on the Westside and coping with its

atrocities is merely a type of everyday hurdle for them to attempt to cross each day—as one participant said, “I take one day at a time, that’s all I can do.”

The approach used in the focus group discussions gave the participants an opportunity to explain their definitions and perspectives of the SBW concept. It also offered the possibility to transfer their definitions and perspectives of the concept to the principles of the womanist concept as defined for this study. Additionally, using this approach offered an explanation of the grandmothers’ existence in relation to their families, including their grandchildren.

My greatest challenges were trying not to steer biases and trying to focus facilitation to keep participants on the discussion topics. An example of my steering bias was that I just had to question Alice about not ever having to struggle because she was able to survive by using her wits or common sense. I asked her if using her wits was in itself a struggle. Previously, she had stated that in order to survive, she had gone from one friend to another, especially with men friends. I questioned her about having feelings of degradation, which I later thought might have been an inappropriate question for me to ask. After explaining what she did to survive, one participant commented loudly and directly that Alice must have had to “do lots of favors.” The implication was clear. Alice stated that she never thought of what she did as degrading but she did admit to being immature at that time in her life. She stated, “At the time, all I thought about was having fun and being taken care of at the same time.”

During the discussions, I tried diligently to adhere to the five canons suggested by Reviere (2000) for a group setting: truth, commitment, justice, community, and harmony. I had the most difficulty maintaining harmony among the group members.

The participants were aware of my physical needs and were able to refrain from acting out negative behaviors. I believed that this might have helped to deter an argumentative atmosphere during the discussions.

The study attained a new level when the participants offered their care and concern for the researcher. It took on an added outcome in that I was sustained by their regard for my welfare. However, even with their care and concern, I was denied entry into their world of collaborative efforts to continue as a community of women offering each other support. As they expressed metaphorically, I had opened the door to a thought process and action—and, they passed through it without me.

CHAPTER 7

FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The Analysis—Moving into a New Direction

The focus group discussions reflected the shared approach that is mandated for afrocentric research and were centered on key themes basic to the data and applicable to the significant emergent subthemes. The focus group categories were coping mechanisms; reasons for not wanting to use social service agencies or to engage with helping professionals; thoughts regarding the SBW concept and how it can be applied to the womanist concept; and the willingness to use collaborative efforts to assist each other. These categories produced main themes and numerous subthemes.

Adding to the Acts of Coping

Within the group, the participants described coping as a behavior mode. This related to their ability to cope using behaviors they considered relevant to them in a given situation. Coping is to behave in a sensible and rational manner without losing control while attempting to handle or solve perceived problematic circumstances. Coping was also described as an attitude of seeking and engaging in activities or using alternative methods to alleviate stress and anxiety.

As in the individual interviews, strength, and struggling led to the emergent major theme of spirituality. For most, the prominent coping method was relying on their

spirituality. Spirituality meant having a belief and trust in God as well as praying and believing in the power of prayer. They iterated using the power of prayer as a major coping mechanism. As Selma said:

Prayer works for me. I pray not just for the problems I have but also for everything. I talk to God the first thing in the morning when I get up and the last thing I do at night is to pray. I don't worry about nothing for I know that He will work it out whether I see it as a good thing or not. If it is not, then I accept it as being His decision....

When asked what else she used as a method of coping, Selma replied, "What else do I need? If I can't figure it out for myself, I take it to Him and He gives me the answer. I don't need anything else." The AACGs use their spirituality in their daily existence and not just for problematic situations but it does involve managing grief and relates to their caring and concern for others. However, Alice retorted with a contrasting view:

Like I said before, I hear all of this talk about our spirituality which is a good thing and I believe in prayer as well as the next one. And like I said, I also remember that God gave each of us a mind and other senses to use. To say that prayer is all we need could be like telling God that He did not bless us with enough sense to look for other ways.

This participant favored using one's wits rather than prayer as a foundation for coping. This related to being able to think for oneself, using one's own mind, common sense and being able to think things through which instills self sufficiency and self reliance. Ironically, this comment appeared to open the participants' minds to problem solving together, active listening, mutual aid, and an attachment relationship.

They suggested ways to interact with each other such as brainstorming and using three-way telephone calls. Pat stated:

Yeah, I can do that. Maybe it is time for me to think about not always trying to do it by myself. 'Cause the people in my church, I can tell one of the sisters about what I am going through and they don't really care. They

just want to know my business. This way, I can have somebody else to lean on.

Marie agreed, stating that she believed her family members do not totally understand her problems although they are willing to help her. She concluded that she could utilize her relationship with the other participants by shifting her reliance from her family to the group for support. She felt this shift would help her eliminate dependence on her relatives and would make her feel less guilty for depending on them.

When asked if they would be willing to learn other coping skills, one participant described the use of coping mechanisms as being irregular in the sense that the methods are not uniformed per situation and she stated:

I cope by using what works best for me. Everybody is different. You can't tell me that every time I feel a certain way or have a particular problem, I need to use that same way to cope. I could have the same problem every day but I would still use a different way to cope each day. It all depends on what I feel at that time.

Another participant stated: "There is nothing special for me to use for coping. For me, there are no set rules for the way I cope. It's what you feel like doing when the time comes for you to get yourself calmed down." Still another participant stated:

How can a person learn how to cope. You talk like all a person have to do is to make a pattern. So if I am having problems with the kids, I use this coping way. If I have a headache from screaming at one of the kids, I use that way. So what do I do? Order up me a way to cope like I order something out of a catalog? That's like somebody teaching those parenting classes you talked about.

Subthemes of resourcefulness and creativity emerged as they related some of their experiences with the children. However, they did not realize these two concepts were coping mechanisms until they were engaged in discussions related to other concepts. For example, Marie, as Sarah had also experienced, had found condoms in her grandson's

room. She thought about the way she could approach the situation and about what steps she should take. She visited the library to locate books on how to discuss sex with teenage boys and the books suggested using creative and resourceful thoughts.

Struggling Yields Strength

Another theme emerged—from struggling comes their strength. Combined with their spirituality, the participants have learned to survive. Struggling was identified as the ability to live with the least or almost the least of anything and is related to endurance, tenacity, and belief in their abilities. The participants implied they believed that with the exception of food, even if they had to forego a basic need such as livable housing or a scarce amount of clothing, they would have the ability to endure and to survive. For a definition, one participant interjected that she believed living on the Westside was a struggle and described keeping watch for her home, the children, and herself while at the same time keeping an eye out for the scary drive by shootings and other gang related activities. She related that there had previously been a large chain grocery store in the community but it is no longer there. She complained about having to shop locally at the expensive neighborhood grocery store—the same store where I stood out front passing out flyers for the study. She went on to describe an aspect of her predicament and felt it was similar to elderly members of the community who do not have transportation:

If I didn't have a car or know how to drive, I don't know what I would do. As it is, the closest chain store is Albertson's, about 3 miles away. This is what I mean by struggling. If I did not have transportation to get me there, it would be a struggle for me to get somewhere in order to buy groceries for my family cheaper, and a better grade of food. Lots of people do not have a way, especially those seniors without cars, and struggle to buy food. Not only that, you have to pay somebody to take you to the store, help you pick out what you want to buy, bring you back home, help you to

put up the groceries and then while you are away, you worry that someone did not see you leave so that they can break into your house while you are gone. That's a form of struggling—having so many things to do while trying to accomplish one thing—to buy groceries!

Alice disagreed, saying she did not believe she had ever struggled in this implied manner, “I don't mean that life has been a crystal stair (quoting an excerpt from Langston Hughes' poem) for me, but I have not had to work hard or struggle and I still lived well. I have not had any so called hard times like you talk about.” Other participants felt it is a struggle being single, African American females, and living in their community and added their belief that a major reason they do not have full access to all of society's benefits is probably because of economics, mainly having enough money.

Strength was related to being able to survive and having endurance. The participants believed they were self reliant and self sufficient enough to persevere. Considering their everyday circumstances, this represented having strength.

The Name Game

They all expressed belief in their own abilities and all related to their perception of the SBW concept and their self esteem. One participant lamented, “I came from a line of strong women too. I consider myself to be strong or else I would not be able to do what I have had to.” Another retorted, “I think that calling yourself a strong Black woman is how you see yourself. If I see myself as one and want to call myself that, then as far I as I am concerned, that's what I am.” Another participant added, “I think that we can be whatever we want to be. We don't necessarily have to call ourselves, as you say, strong Black women. We just know we are.”

Seeking and Utilizing Social Services

Independence, self sufficiency, and self reliance were also related to the strength and survival themes. These were prominent themes that emerged relative to the participants' attitudes for not seeking and utilizing the services of helping professionals. Most believe that bureaucratic rules and the overall attitudes of those in the helping professions are imposing and demeaning. Alice gave her opinion, "Most social service agencies are not set up to allow us grandmothers to help ourselves. In fact, I think that all of them are set up to cause people to depend on them." When asked what she meant, she replied, "In order to get something, something must be wrong with us. They probably figure that the reason we have our grandchildren in the first place is because we didn't raise our own kids right or something." Ironically, Alice was the only participant who utilizes all of the community resources that are available to her. She further related, "Well, you know we have to qualify to receive any type of assistance. But, you know, like I said, receiving assistance from an agency can become sort of a crutch.' Another participant agreed:

Yeah, then they figure it all out, right? They don't even bother to ask what you think about your problems or how you can help to solve it or better yet, how you can solve it yourself. Going to any agency would be the last place I would go to.

Another participant, Selma, retorted, "See—I tell you. You don't need nobody but the Lord and yourself to depend on." Marie agreed with Alice:

The little contact that I have had with them, I think that they look for reasons to deny you services. They make you feel so little. Even the way they answer the telephone. That is, if you can get through. They can make you feel very low if you let them.

This discussion led to their perception of a problem and the participants agreed that a problem is only a problem if they perceive it as one. They believed that most agencies have no regard for hearing their voices in the decision making relating to their problems. That is, no one asks or wants to listen to them about their concerns.

Becoming a Womanist--Will it Work?

The themes that emerged and were related to this discussion were attachment, mutual aid, active listening, problem solving, open mindedness, and willingness to share strength with each other. The participants were asked if they could agree that they could help each other, and Martha replied:

I believe that we could do that. And if, say if I have a problem and I went to another person here and asked for suggestions, and if I am not satisfied with the suggestion or not satisfied with the ideas, I could go to another person here. Or maybe we could do a 3-way by phone if that's okay.

This represented thoughts on how they could relate to each other with discussions of active listening, mutual aid, and problem solving. Sarah said, "I don't mind talking to someone else about what's happening with me. I don't mind listening and helping any of you either, if I can."

Included in the discussion were themes related to loneliness, isolation, exchanging sex for something, and again independence and self sufficiency. They expressed feelings of loneliness but still stated they did not have time to deal with issues surrounding relationships. The participants expressed that sex and men are not part of their coping strategy. If sex could be used, it would be used as an equal exchange for something, such as quid pro quo sex as Alice described in her relationships with the male entertainers. Their feelings about the themes related back to what they learned when they were younger—sex and men equal babies and problems.

Discussing feelings of loneliness led to discussions about isolation. Pat had related visiting her daughter's grave, and we then discussed talking to the departed as if they were alive. Some participants discussed the fact that being around other people could alleviate some of their feelings of isolation but they implied this was not feasible because of trust issues, relating back to the "they just want to know my business." However, these participants were willing to form an attachment with their fellow group members, offering mutual aid.

Other Related Concepts

Regarding the emerging theme of out of control children, one participant stated:

But I think that because we are older, raising our grandchildren, than we were when we were raising our own children, the problems we might have with our grandchildren might seem greater than that same problem we might have had with our own children. Our patience might be shorter. Maybe we can't think as fast as we could then.

Emergent subthemes included integration into general society, assimilation, new values, and a discard of cultural values. They believed that these were the events that have caused the change in the behavior of their grandchildren. As one participant related:

When I was coming up, you would never hear a Black child tell a parent that "I hate you" or nothing like that. There sure is a difference in the way Black children behave today. It seems that our children don't have respect for grown folks like we did or our children did.

For the emergent theme of family maintenance, a participant declared;

What if you don't want to have legal custody of the children? To me, that's like taking those children away from my daughter forever. She is always their mother.

Other emergent subthemes were close ties to community and familiars; clarification of role and role change; and safety concerns as they faced daily dangers in the community.

There was such a very fine line of distinctions between themes and emerging sub-themes that most can be interchanged in some way. Many of the emergent subthemes overlapped into the same concepts or the same themes.

Focus Group Findings—Bringing it Together

In the focus group discussions, the core themes—coping mechanisms; utilizing helping professionals and resources from social services agencies; and the SBW versus womanist concepts—led to emergent themes in the discussions. In turn, as their experiences were revealed, they became helpful disclosures as each participants attempted to understand and relate to the other AACGs. Their rich dialogues and discourses put forth information that exposed their personal feelings, their experience, and understandings.

Other than using their spirituality, no specific coping method is used. Their coping methods are not static, but are unpredictable and adjustable and each participant uses what is perceived as the best method. Their current strategy is simply what works the best at the time. Understanding, acknowledging, and respecting AACGs' with or without perceptions of the SBW as a basis for coping identify other positive coping skills which arise from their definitions and could lead to other strategies which are useful in improving their ability to raise their grandchildren.

These AACGs depend on their strengths to give them the ability to overcome struggles and endure problematic situations. They know how to survive. Although most believe they can endure what they consider to be bureaucratic sluggishness, most prefer not to. They usually disregard helping professionals who they believe do not have respect for their opinions, or ideas. The participants strongly believe the helping

professionals they have encountered have not assisted them but have made them feel degraded and intimidated.

Answering the Question—Can They or Can't They?

Following the discussions, subthemes of attachment, mutual aid, and open mindedness emerged. Other subthemes included active listening, problem solving together, and their understanding of the womanist concept as it applies to the study. Although they are unwilling to totally give up their belief in the SBW concept, they seemed willing to engage in the process of being a womanist. This appeared to open their minds, regarding resourcefulness and creativity and how they can offer each other their strengths and support in an endeavor to raise their grandchildren.

In a broader sense, the patterns and themes from the focus group discussions shed light on the main research question regarding the participants' ability to collaborate collectively in sharing their strengths and methods of resilience. These AACGs believed that a collaborative effort would be beneficial to them.

Having a voice in interventions related to them and their grandchildren is important to the participants as is having feelings of capability. Respect for their knowledge and cultural values is also very important. They do not believe that helping professionals pay attention to these elements, their values, and their individual attributes.

The participants believed they could pay attention to each other but were not sure about other AACGs in or out of their community as they believed others would be suspicious of their intent based on their own perceptions and their hesitation to disclose information about themselves. They realized that they would need to change their attitudes about how they share information with other group members.

They admitted a collaborative effort would be beneficial this could lessen their dependence on their fellow church members, a practice that they seemed to detest. They also felt they could lessen dependence on family members although this reason caused guilt feelings regardless of the closeness to their family members. Finally, they wanted to share a sense of sisterhood and felt an important reason was so they could share thoughts and ideas and offer their strength and support with others in similar circumstances.

CHAPTER 8

THEREFORE I AM

Study Summary—The Literature Versus Findings

For the most part, the AAGCs attended to attributes that are particular to the culture such as strong family ties and kinship bonds, their beliefs relative to child rearing, their ability to switch roles, and their spiritual values, including their relationship to a higher being. As the literature indicated, some of the grandmothers had strong family ties and kinship bonds and some did not. Martha and Marie had very strong family ties and kinship bonds. Catherine and Alice did not. Some of the participants had problems with role changes and had learned that moving from the grandmother to mother role was not as easy as parts of literature suggest. Pat and her older grandchildren continue to be confused about her role as custodial grandparent. None of the participants were care providers for elderly, infirmed, or frail family members so this was not a situation that was extra burdensome.

The literature pointed out that care giving roles for grandmothers could have negative effects on their physical and emotional well-being as well as adding a financial burden on them. The participants stated this was not necessarily true for them and becoming custodial grandmothers was not the cause as most had previous financial difficulties and physical ailments. Most consider themselves to be SBWs, but they do not believe this caused them stress or other health problems as the literature related.

All had some degree of a relationship with God and a spiritual influence in their lives. Some had stronger relationships than others. Their cosmology was expressed in their exhibition of connectedness with their spirituality. They exhibited this with the unbroken circle of prayer at the beginning of each focus group meeting and with their connectedness and concern for the researcher.

I am because we are. Because we are, therefore I am (Mbiti, 1970). These statements refer to the sharing of a particular experience by a group of people. All of the study participants were deeply rooted in the African American culture by their similarities of dialogues, expressions, gestures and meanings.

As they have assumed full parental duties and responsibilities of their grandchildren, the participants in the study fall into the surrogate grandparent category as described by Neugarten and Weinstein (1964). All of the participants were African American single women who have taken on midlife challenges as custodial grandmothers.

Using the concepts derived from the literature review such as the SBW and womanist concepts, the participants' spiritual influences, kinship bonds, cultural strengths, flexible coping skills, and afrocentrism, all made the study possible and at the same time, made the study unique. This was because these concepts guided the study in a manner to include the participants, their stories, their histories, and their struggles to survive and thrive while raising their grandchildren. The concepts explained the reason the participants and their lived experiences should be studied. Traditional and unique relations between the study concepts described in the methodology were building blocks that gave direction to the study, and explained how the participants and their lived

experiences could be studied. These concepts formed the basis for an afrocentric approach to the methods used in the study. This included introspective, retrospective, and reflective examinations, and an alternative paradigm. All of the concepts used were tools that were applied to gaining access to the proprietary and perhaps elusive knowledge and insights that AACGs had. Some AACGs may tend to not disclose much about their personal lives and using an afrocentric approach was important as it caused them to be less selective in what they disclosed about their lived experiences and their behaviors.

The afrocentric narrative inquiry brought about an awareness of disclosures, subtleties and hidden facts that otherwise might never have come to light from the women in the study. This type of inquiry provided a framework that elicited the poignant voices of the participants and produced and offered the interpretations of the grandmothers' experiences. The study offered a centered place for the AACGs. Neither the grandchildren nor their biological parents, though mentioned and discussed, were centered subjects of the study.

Using an afrocentric, womanist epistemological paradigm explained the nature of the participants' knowledge surrounding their strengths and resilience, and their self concepts. The paradigm was specifically intended to encourage collaborative efforts to generate insight and to recognize the problems and issues they face as individual AACGs. This would lead to the formation of a strengths based, self-help support group where together, they could craft strategies and solutions to their problems and issues based on their perception of problems and issues. In a group effort, utilizing the afrocentric womanist epistemological paradigm guided inquiries that led to the consideration by the

participants to provide a mutual aid relationship between themselves and the possibility of banding together with other AACGs within their community.

A womanist perspective embodied ways to initiate efforts between women with similar circumstances who could join together to mobilize multiple systems between themselves. As a community of AACGs, they formed a focused effort to offer support to each other. As a strengths based group of grandmothers, they agreed they should be able to generate knowledge for each to use that would enable them to produce solutions to assist each other in raising their grandchildren and to gain support from each other.

Conclusion

The literature suggested that AACGs living in innercity communities, as well as those who reside in rural communities, are in dire need of various interventions addressing issues surrounding their grandchildren. These interventions may include a successful management of grandchildren's behavior problems, especially of teenaged grandchildren, their ability to communicate, and the development of meaningful, positive relationships with grandchildren, and perhaps with the grandchildren's peer groups. Also AACGs could have concerns regarding the grandchildren's involvement with sexual and drug related activities as well as gang involvement which could be intensified by the generational gap between grandchild and grandmother and the grandmother's lack of knowledge in raising children in today's society.

Whether anticipated or not, and as the literature suggested, researchers and helping professionals have become aware of more grandparents assuming the role of primary caregiver and bearing full responsibility for the care for their grandchildren. This has occurred at a time when a multitude of parents have either neglected, abused, or

abandoned their children and have left their parental responsibilities to others. For many children who are not in a formal care system such as foster care, many grandparents have found themselves to be care giving parents again, taking on their own children's responsibilities. In many instances, the care giving grandparent has been the grandmother.

While interest in the number of grandmothers raising their grandchildren has escalated, studies on African American custodial grandmothers (AACGs) have remained scarce in comparison to studies on grandmothers of other ethnic groups. According to research studies, the likelihood of single, low income, African American grandmothers becoming sole provider of their grandchildren has increased. As with grandmothers of other ethnic groups, there are varied reasons many AACGs have been placed in their custodial roles. Their own children (the parents of their grandchildren) may be victims of drugs and alcohol addictions, be HIV positive, and may have died as a result of these problems. The parents may have died for other reasons or they are incarcerated.

Historically, AACGs have not had an active voice in providing information about themselves or their concerns. This study supported a suggestion that this may be by their doing. If so, it is because many AACGs in the study believe that they do not have a voice in policy decision making reflecting their plight. The study revealed that some AACGs believe social service providers have "deaf ears" when it comes to providing services that the AACGs believe they need. They feel that service providers do not respect their roles as caregivers, their opinions, or their realities. In recent years, there have been a few studies that have recognized and explored strengths in African American women in

general, but not with AACGs in particular. Research to date on AACGs as a group has focused on the reasons that members of this group are situated in their roles but has not addressed how AACGs are able to maintain their roles as custodial parents the second time around. In addition to sustaining levels of poverty or near poverty, with single AACGs, the sources of their stamina, resilience, strengths, and self will have been largely ignored.

The major aim of this undertaking was for the AACGs in the study to tell about the experiences, beliefs, values, strengths, coping mechanisms, and other characteristics that allow them to take on the task of raising their grandchildren. In a focus group setting, the study purpose was to develop a mindset for the AACGs to take action in moving from their perceived problem-posing state to a perceived problem-solving stage. This was done by utilizing an afrocentric approach that not only provided a forum for the grandmothers to voice their concerns, but also offered a centered cultural place for them to generate their knowledge, their wisdom, beliefs, understandings, and values related to their worldviews.

It was not the intention of this research to be confined only to the conventional frameworks in exploring the AACGs' lifestyles, their strengths, their use of coping mechanisms, their ability to raise their grandchildren in today's world, and in their initiative to cross involve themselves with each other. Instead, this study aimed to break new ground and to lead to research findings that provided more insight and awareness into descriptive accounts of the lives of these single AACGs as their stories unfolded, evolved, were told, expressed, and discovered.

A positive sense of self was discovered through the AACGs' own culture of resistance and their reliance on lessons learned or passed down from generations. The qualitative study captured the AACGs' lived experiences from their perspectives, and discovered that the participants do indeed possess skills, knowledge, and experiences needed to raise their grandchildren.

For this study, a womanist was defined as an "updated" SBW and as one who recognizes that her individual strengths are a necessary component for a group effort. A womanist perception was introduced as being innovative and helpful in guiding the AACGs, for a collaborative group effort, toward an initiative to reach out to each other for support and assistance. The group effort was meant to form a kinship of the study participants who would be able to bind together and share their strengths, self will, resilience, ideas, and values, and to use these with each other in their efforts to raise their grandchildren. Their verification of truths and their collective experiences that emerged through the study process was the final authority with respect to the validity of what the study informed about their lives.

Limitations and Delimitations

Gaps in the afrocentric literature do not provide sufficient information relating to a research methodology. There is a lack of direction in formulating afrocentric methods for data collection and analysis in a qualitative sense. This placed the researcher in the position of having to create or having to devise theories and concepts to include in a methodology. Because of this, the researcher incorporated and improvised using similar methods established in conventional approaches.

For this study, only those AACGs residing in an area known as the Westside in Las Vegas, Nevada were interviewed and observed. This study was not solely built upon previous afrocentric research, as such research is limited.

Discussion

There is a need for AACGs to identify their own issues and assist with their own problem solving. Providing indepth knowledge of their experiences and how various influences and different factors affect their lives can do this. Merely concentrating on AACGs' stressors and problems, as the literature suggested, ignores the origins of their strengths and resilience that could be useful in co-designing interventions addressing their issues.

In order to develop resources, structures, techniques, and processes in helping to plan achievable goals in assisting AACGs, it is important for social workers and other helping professionals to begin with a systematic premise about the nature of their behavior. There is a need to consider the AACGs' cultural values and beliefs, and the experiences that have informed their lives and shaped their perspectives. It is necessary to determine not only how they cope, but also what motivates and maintains them in the day-to-day care and responsibilities of raising their grandchildren. It is necessary for helping professionals to assume interests in perceiving the AACGs in a holistic manner and to gain knowledge of the AACGs' experiences and their behaviors and to use this knowledge as a foundation for developing new social work practices.

There are several reasons why this study is important. For general purposes, the study can be of use to those who examine familial relationships and want to see current research on care giving grandmothers. Although this study targeted only a microcosm of

the AACG population and their problems, it can be a template for social scientists and others who may want to reproduce it in another population.

The methodology used in this study was eclectic and mixed. It provided the unique perspective of African American grandmothers on African American grandmothers' issues that is not only useful to this population, but to others. Since there is little research in the area of AACGs, this investigation took it a bit further by incorporating an afrocentric approach in order to gather the most reliable information. Since many African Americans have a tendency to not divulge information about themselves, or if they do, the information is sometimes disclosed in a manner that may be meant intentionally to be misleading or misunderstood by others.

The problems of AACGs globally may or may not be unique ones, but certain problems of the AACGs in Las Vegas, Nevada may be distinct to this population. A primary issue for AACGs in Las Vegas may be a lack of support from family and/or community members, whereas AACGs in rural Mississippi may report a lack of financial resources as their greatest difficulty.

One result this study hoped to produce was to help the AACGs realize and/or verbalize their own needs. Perhaps they were not aware that they were in need of extra support and services, or that they had a need to express. They may not have considered things like their advanced age, waning health, raising children in today's environment, and the increased impact that these issues may have on their existing condition. They may have been unaware or unable to express themselves in other ways.

Although this study concentrated on AACGs, particularly their strengths and challenges, the implications of this study go far beyond its main focus on them. The

study forces a look into the future at what will most likely become a greater problem of the “skipped generation” and the resulting fallout. Perhaps those who are interested in correcting or controlling societal ills will realize that it will be necessary to provide more indepth assistance and services to those who will be affected by this crisis.

Grandparents are more likely to be the caretakers of children whose parents cannot care for them. It is inevitable that, without the presence of parents who themselves will become grandparents, that the relational fabricate of the family will break down further. If it becomes necessary for a grandparent to assume the role of parent and provide primary care for the children, what happens when there is no grandparent? If mother and father are absent when their kids become parents, the kindred care structure of the family will be severely limited by this missing resource. When the children become parents themselves, and then their children’s grandparents are absent, it affects not only the parent/grandparent structure of the family but other kindred ties as well. These missing parent/grandparents are aunts, uncles, and cousins to other children who may need the care of extended family. If they are not available as resources, what happens to these children? Undoubtedly, this will inflate the numbers in the foster and other state run protective custody programs.

As helping professionals become more aware of the problem, they can implement a preventive approach by providing some early detection and/or intervention services to those involved. At the very least, perhaps some current services and programs will be overhauled to reflect the changing family structure and the changes in support that these families will need. This study is a good resource for those who want to take the research further and apply it to preventive strategies.

One important aspect of this study was the focus group discussions. Allowing the study participants to gather and discuss issues raised by the study questions was an important conclusion to the overall study. It is hoped that their participation in the focus group discussions further empowered the AACGs. At the very least, they should be able to come together as a support group for one another, recognizing that an alliance with those similarly situated may be beneficial. Even if they never again assemble as a formal group, the exchange of phone numbers and information gathered during the discussions may be invaluable. Perceiving a group of AACGs as a community represents a circular and collective relationship. Using a group effort to combine their talent, skills, strengths, beliefs, ideas, values, and other individual inner resources, a group or community of AACGs can establish support for each other. As a group, they can affect their community of AACGs in a positive way. Doing this can present foundational opportunities to provide a positive support system for each other and promote the adage of the African proverb “it takes a village to raise a child.”

Implications for Further Research and Social Work Practice

Further research may find that particular strengths and challenges within the AACG community are not exclusive and that other cultures have similar ways of coping with their issues. Whatever the similarities or differences, more research is needed to identify and attend to the major problems that AACGs convey.

This study revealed that the participants do possess skills, knowledge, and experiences needed to raise their grandchildren. It can be assumed that AACGs need interventions that positively impact their perceptions of their issues and often these issues have been identified by others, rather than by the AACGs. There is a need for AACGs to

identify their own issues and to assist with their own problem solving. A method for doing this is for helping professionals to collect indepth knowledge of their experiences, strengths, and resilience. This would inform how various influences and different factors affect their lives.

Merely concentrating on the AACGs' stressors and problems, ignores their strengths and resilience that are useful in co-designing interventions addressing their issues. AACGs have worth and value. This can be shown by providing the necessary information that runs counter to the assumption of negative images as they relate to AACGs, such as the matriarch and the SBW. In order for helping professionals to assist in ensuring strong and healthy families headed by AACGs, there is a need to know more about their daily lives and what impacts the structural factors in their ability to live and survive. It is necessary for helping professionals to have an amount of awareness and understanding of the AACGs coping mechanisms, their life experiences, and their perspectives.

Taking Leave

The plan was to be able to take leave at some point; however, the AACGs have been my rock. In the beginning they perceived me as one of them although this was certainly not what I intended. In a sense, I felt as if I had left the role of the researcher and had become something more than that during the study. In addition to learning the AACGs stories, they have learned about my story. It appeared that my obvious similarities to them came into play. I feel that I have exposed my vulnerabilities to them. It goes deeper than merely thanking them for participating in the study. I am obligated to thank them for being there for me and for being caring and supportive. They have

reminded me that I have frailties just as they have. They have reminded me that I need to reach out for support too and not to totally rely on perceiving myself as totally, a strong Black woman.

EPILOGUE

The participants all continue contact with me; Pat contacts me more than the others. Most interactions with each other are done by the telephone but it appears those who attended the focus group discussions still remain slow in seeking each other's assistance.

Pat related that one of Sarah's two boys has expressed interest in attending barber school. Sarah has a sister who lives in Texas in the same type of neighborhood as the Westside but there is a barber school located in the sister's community and she is interested in taking the boys away from Las Vegas and the Westside. According to Pat, Sarah called Selma, the evangelist, to ask for her opinion and Selma questioned Sarah about uprooting herself from a job where she has worked for many years, and moving out of state to another area that is similar to the neighborhood where she currently resides. Selma suggested that Sarah consider the vocational schools in Las Vegas as one of her nieces attends beauty college at one of the schools.

I was surprised to hear Sarah had asked for advice because during the individual interview with her, I had offered suggestions for contacting various mentoring programs for young African American boys and men and she had rejected each suggestion stating that she had previously been given unfavorable information about all of them.

In speaking with the other participants, I was disappointed to learn they are still reluctant to share any information with me, other than to say they are still trying to recruit

other grandmothers both in and out of their residential area. Pat says this is because of their concern for my wellbeing as they do not want to cause me stress. I wonder if this is a way to pacify me.

One AACG who was interviewed individually but did not participate in the focus group called and thanked me for referring her to Habitat for Humanity. Her name has been placed on the waiting list for a self-help built home.

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